

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE VIRTUAL VAMPIRE





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
VIRTUAL VAMPIRE**

With full power and aggressiveness, a vampire shoots towards the screen and smashes it with enormous force, cracking the glass. With blood-curdling squeals, it keeps ramming the glass, trying to break through. Enthusiastically, The Three Investigators, Jupiter, Pete and Bob, dive into a brand-new computer game, fighting off vampires, beasts and monsters... and solving puzzles along the way. Little by little, they realize that the tasks they face in the virtual world have connections with mysterious events in the real world...

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Virtual Vampire

*Original German text by
André Minninger*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

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Die drei ???: Vampir im Internet

(The Three ???: Vampire on the Internet)

by

André Minninger

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Cover art by

Aiga Rasch

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1. Invitation by E-Mail

The mouth dripping with saliva was threateningly wide open! The long pointed fangs and bloodshot eyes clearly showed that this monster was by no means a peaceful specimen. Every muscle was stretched to the limit. The animal seemed ready to attack to tear its victim to pieces. The monster presented itself in bright colours on a large poster on the wall.

'Sweet Revenge—You Won't Trust Your Feelings' was the caption in neon yellow. Apparently it served as part of an effective advertising campaign.

Pete shuddered at the sight of this horror creature. His two friends, Jupiter and Bob, on the other hand, only had a tired smile for this fantasy creature.

The three detectives were sitting on a black leather sofa, eagerly waiting to meet a man at 5 pm sharp. The man had requested them to go to his office on the third floor of a commercial building in Kensington Road.

Bob pulled out of his pocket a computer tablet, a loan from his father, tapped a small button briefly and glanced anxiously at the digital display.

"Mr Dungeon's secretary had informed us that our appointment has been delayed for a few minutes, but now her boss is fifteen minutes late!" Nervously he drummed his foot on the carpeted floor.

"Detectives have to be patient," the First Investigator admonished his friend Bob and gazed with shining eyes at the gruesome monster poster. "Regarding this interesting poster, I think it would be useful to excuse Mr Dungeon's lateness without grumbling. I'm beginning to suspect that this meeting is a most delightful affair."

At that moment, the door was opened and a middle-aged man entered the room with quick steps. Hurriedly he closed the door behind him before he headed for the leather sofa with his hand outstretched in greeting.

The three detectives rose and examined the man thoroughly. He wore a loose-fitting double-breasted suit with a light-coloured shirt underneath, on which slight sweat stains were visible. With a jerk, he loosened the wide tie from his neck. It depicted Uncle Scrooge taking a refreshing bath in his money bin.

"Hello, my name is Dungeon." With a broad smile on his tanned face, he shook the boys' hands. Bob registered a discreet but very precious watch on his wrist.

"May I give you our card?" Jupiter said. Out of his denim jacket he pulled a business card and handed it to Mr Dungeon. It said:



“Nice of you to accept my invitation, boys. Now I finally get to meet The Three Investigators in person!” Mr Dungeon pressed a small wall switch that started the ceiling fan and sank exhausted into his armchair. With a sigh he took off his shoes and asked the boys to sit down again. “Damned heat out there! Hasn’t Mrs Bushford offered you anything to drink?”

Jupiter smiled. “Your secretary was very obliging. But we wanted to wait for your arrival.”

Mr Dungeon wiped his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief. “Sorry I’m late, boys, but this afternoon traffic out there makes it almost impossible to move forward quickly. Traffic jam on every other street corner! I’m gonna get a mountain bike now. This puts me several noses ahead of all motorists. At least in heavy traffic.”

“A wise decision,” Pete agreed.

“Will you join me for a drink of water?” Without waiting for an answer, Mr Dungeon pressed the button on the intercom.

“Lily, bring us four sodas, please!” He leaned back, took a deep breath and crossed his arms at the neck. “I don’t want to keep you in suspense for long, so here’s an important question first: Are you currently involved in an investigation, or can I use your detective skills for about a week?”

“It depends on the job.” Jupiter crossed his legs and gave Mr Dungeon a questioning look. “As a rule, we make a decision only after our clients have openly presented the facts of the case to us.”

“That’s it, boys!” Mr Dungeon nodded approvingly.

“You seem to me to be the ideal choice for my project—young, dynamic and bright! And as I have seen from press reports, you do not shy away from difficulties either. I also don’t have the intention of involving you in any sort of danger. This is exactly why I chose you and invited you to my office by e-mail!”

At this moment, the three detectives turned to the door. Mrs Bushford entered the room and served the soft drinks on a tray. “Anything else I can do for you, Doe?”

“Thank you, Lily. That’s it for now.” Mr Dungeon slyly winked at his secretary as she left the room.

Thirsty Pete put the glass to his lips and emptied the contents in long gulps. “So, Mr Dungeon, what sort of a job do you have for us?”

“Child abduction,” Mr Dungeon said. His lips narrowed to a line. “Without the slightest warning, Trulie’s infant was snatched! Suddenly, through the closed window, a creature unlike any other human being fell into the room. It grabbed the child out of the cradle and fled with it through the shattered window. The nurse then suffered a nervous breakdown.”

“You... you’re kidding.” Horrified, Pete placed his empty glass on the small coffee table.

“In Europe, this creature is known as a ghoul. The inhabitants of the Carpathian Mountains have often seen him creeping around at night. They say: ‘He who looks a ghoul in the eye carries the curse of evil.’”

“Sounds more like the opening scene of a scary fantasy flick than an actual event,” Jupiter said. “A ghoul is a vampire’s slave. A winged ape-like creature condemned to procure fresh human blood on behalf of its master.” He looked critically at Mr Dungeon.

“Are there any clues as to where the ghoul has escaped with his prey,” Bob asked with interest, without responding to the doubting remarks of his two detective colleagues.

“The evidence is there. And everything seems to indicate that the ghoul has taken Trulie’s child to a castle in Transylvania.”

“Transylvania?” Bob frowned. “It’s in Europe. More precisely, in Romania. Apart from the fact that I don’t believe in hair-raising descriptions for one cent, Romania is in my opinion a little too far away to carry out investigations.”

Mr Dungeon cleared his throat. “You don’t have to go out of the country for your investigation, boys. It seems the vampire has left Europe with his hostage and fled with him to the United States. I’ve been told from the highest levels that workers in the Mount Valley sewers here in Los Angeles have made what I consider to be a frightening find.”

“From the highest levels?” Bob asked critically. “What are you trying to say?”

Mr Dungeon lowered his voice. “The CIA and FBI.”

Jupiter blew a surprised whistle.

“The sewer workers found a diaper in the underground tunnel system. It was on a ledge next to a sewer shaft and it was... well, how shall I put it... used.” Mr Dungeon took a narrow pipe out of the desk drawer and began to fill it with tobacco.

“The men immediately reported their discovery to the police, because nobody could explain who could have taken off the diaper. It’s almost impossible to get down there unless you have a special key. In the past, homeless people were all too often in the sewerage systems, so the city put a stop to this a long time ago.”

Jupiter, Pete and Bob looked at Mr Dungeon with anticipation. But before he continued with his description, he lit the pipe and blew little rings into the air.

“The police officers first laughed when they were presented with the diaper. But the matter seemed strange to the supervisor and he passed the find on to the forensic laboratory for investigation. Well, what can I say? The result caused even the most experienced experts to ponder. Because what was in the diaper was not from a man, let alone a baby...”

“Well then?” Pete wanted to know.

Mr Dungeon looked at the three detectives seriously. “The medical analysis was conclusive—there were traces of bat droppings in the diaper—by a species that has been extinct for many centuries!”

“You’re... you’re kidding!” Against his will, Bob had to laugh.

“There’s no need for that,” Mr Dungeon said with a straight face. “The information is from a reliable source. The CIA and the FBI are puzzled. But for me it is clear—the diaper found in the sewer belonged to Trulie’s abducted baby. And the forensic report makes me suspect something terrible.”

“Which is?” Pete didn’t take his eyes off their potential client.

“The vampire has already sucked blood and made little Vinton, as the baby is called, his equal! The gruesome transformation could have taken place down there in the sewers. Vinton became a vampire who now goes on nightly forays with his master and is only greedy for one thing—fresh human blood!”

Bob did not let himself be put off. “Mr Dungeon, what you’re telling us is complete rubbish and you know it. But assuming your story checks out, I have another question.”

“Go ahead,” the client encouraged him.

“If little Vinton has already become a vampire, there is not the slightest chance of returning the child to the mother unharmed. After all, he would be an undead, crumbling to dust in sunlight.”

“Nothing’s been proven yet,” Mr Dungeon said firmly. “I’m just guessing so far. And this is where your task begins. The first thing you have to do is to make sure of that.”

“You mentioned earlier that you were planning to fill us in for this mission,” Jupiter turned to Mr Dungeon. “Are you saying you’re gonna hire us for an ad campaign?” He

pointed meaningfully at the glaring poster on the wall. “A new adventure tour, a sort of ghost train in an amusement park. Do you want us as extras?”

“No, no!” Mr Dungeon shook his head in a determined manner. “On the contrary. Your project, provided you agree to the assignment, will take place under the strictest secrecy and in camera. You are sworn to absolute secrecy. Should you decide to take up the hunt for the vampire, I will provide you with equipment that will outshine everything that is available today on the open market!”

“Hold on, hold on!” Pete got up from the leather sofa and slowly stepped over to Mr Dungeon at his desk. “Did I hear you right? You want us to free a kidnapped child from the clutches of a vampire, and you want to equip us with the appropriate weapons for this mission?”

Mr Dungeon nodded again. “However, weapons are not enough. Your opponent is intelligent and will usually be able to predict how you will behave in dangerous situations. It will not be easy to trick him.”

“This... this is all madness,” Pete stammered stunned. “You can’t possibly be serious! I mean, how are we supposed to fight ghouls and vampires in the flesh?”

Jupiter couldn’t help but grin.

“Before you decide on anything, maybe we should go next door.” Mr Dungeon took a shoehorn out of a desk drawer and slipped his shoes back.

“Next door?” Pete wanted to know. “Why?”

“There you will find all the equipment you need to send this vampire to the afterlife once and for all!”

2. The Task Explained

Mr Dungeon stepped out into the corridor and opened the opposite door.

“Don’t trip over any of the wires,” he warned. “Access to this room is normally restricted to personnel only. So watch your step.” He pointed to the floor, where there was a tangle of countless cables, connecting cords and plugs.

Two huge monitors were enthroned on a computer table. They were in operation, but only showed a screen saver—white star dots that seemed to fly towards the viewer in black space. Jupiter, Pete and Bob looked around carefully. The many computers, keyboards, scanners, printers and CD burners made it easy to see that this was the workplace of a computer specialist.

Mr Dungeon headed for a shelf on which were stacked countless CDs and pulled one out. The label had only one word in block letters—‘DEMO’.

“Great equipment you have here,” Bob said, full of admiration. “Everything of the finest! They must have cost a fortune!” He marvelled at a high-speed multiple-disk CD duplicator. With this device, copies of CDs could be made in a very short time.

“Great, isn’t it?” Mr Dungeon was visibly proud and pointed to a pedestal on which there was a DAT recorder, other computers and a laptop. “I couldn’t be without these devices. They’re my life, so to speak!”

“Are you a programmer?” asked Jupiter bluntly, earning a satisfied nod from Mr Dungeon.

“With heart and soul!” He put the CD in the drive and pressed a few buttons. “The computer world and real life have one thing in common—both are a game in my eyes!”

“Then I guess I’m right in guessing that you’re into computer games, aren’t you?” The First Investigator looked at the monitor with interest and found his suspicion immediately confirmed. Instead of the star flight simulation, the poisonous green words ‘Sweet Revenge’ now appeared on the screen in melting letters, while eerie orchestral music sounded from the speakers next to it.

“This is the same lettering as the poster in your office!” Pete exclaimed. “So that’s what this is all about! So much for kidnapping and a vampire stalking Los Angeles! This whole thing is only a computer game!”

Mr Dungeon flinched involuntarily. “What do you mean ‘only’? You should not make the mistake of underestimating today’s technology and the creativity that goes with it!”

“Pete is sometimes a bit impulsive,” Bob tried to calm Mr Dungeon, who probably felt insulted.

“I understand.” Mr Dungeon nervously blinked his eyes. “Your friends are right, Bob. *Sweet Revenge* is a fantasy adventure game that is advertised on the poster in my office. But the computer game is not yet on the market. The programming is finished, but the game still has to undergo a test run—from a team that is completely impartial and unsuspecting. A team that plays through *Sweet Revenge* from the beginning to the grand finale in order to detect possible irregularities in content or programming that my crew and I may have overlooked or not considered during programming.” He pointed proudly at the screen.

While a strange fluttering sounded out of the loudspeakers, a bat approached on the monitor in perfect animation from the dark starry sky. It shot towards the viewer in a flash! In its aggressiveness, it did not seem to register the screen in the slightest. It hit it with enormous force! Cracks appeared on the monitor. But the bat didn't give up! Again and again it rammed its snout against the screen and tried to break it with all its might. This was accompanied by a blood-curdling squeal and the sound of shattering glass. But despite the ever-widening cracks, the screen seemed to withstand the attack.

Finally, the aggressive animal gave up. The eyes glowed angrily once more, then it fluttered back into the darkness. The screen remained black.

"Oh, boy." Pete stroked a strand of hair from his face. "I don't really want to meet this vampire. But I would be very tempted to use a joystick to send the bloodsucker to the afterlife!"

"Great!" Bob added enthusiastically. "This is the best I've seen so far. If the further course of the game is as fascinating as this little demonstration, I would say—we'll take the case! What do you think, Jupe?"

"No question about it, we're in!" The eyes of the First Investigator flashed adventurously. Computer games with a balanced mixture of action and logical thinking fascinated him. Unfortunately, he had hardly found the time—apart from school, detective work and work at his uncle's salvage yard—to deal more intensively with this attractive medium. So it was hardly surprising that Jupiter enthusiastically agreed to Mr Dungeon's assignment alongside his two friends.

"I knew I could count on you!" Mr Dungeon breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed like a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders. "You can't imagine the constant stress I'm under. And it has been two and a half years. I've been working on this vampire thing for so long. *Sweet Revenge* will be a million-dollar success! I'm firmly convinced of it! I don't want to promise you too much, but what I'm going to send worldwide via the Internet in the near future will exceed the wildest dreams of all computer game enthusiasts!"

"Over the Internet?" Pete listened with interest. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Mr Dungeon sat down on a knee-high computer and crossed his legs. "Once upon a time, people sat in their homes, wrote letters which they then put in an envelope and threw in the mailbox. Or they played computer games against themselves. Or they read in the morning newspaper about events that had happened the day before. This has changed in the age of worldwide communications. Although you usually still sit alone in front of your PC, the door to the world is wide open thanks to the Internet. It opens up a whole new world for us."

"We are in the technical age," Jupiter commented on Mr Dungeon's lecture with an important undertone. "Letters become e-mail, conversations with people who live on the other side of the world take place as online chat. What no one could have imagined a few years ago has now happened. The Internet accompanies our lives and will probably play an even more important role in the near future than television does today."

"Quite agree," Mr Dungeon said. "The Internet makes it possible for *Sweet Revenge* to be played interactively worldwide, even though the players are scattered all over the globe sitting at their computers. In the artificial computer landscape, they meet on the screen. They form a community and develop strategies as a team to defeat the opponent—in this case represented by a vampire—and to put an end to it once and for all!"

"How many people can participate in the game?" Bob wanted to know. He was responsible for research and records and attached great importance to keeping his knowledge of the computer world up to date.

"Each game, three participants slip into the role of a knight. Using the keyboard, they can enter their own name, with which they are personally addressed by the animated characters and fantasy creatures throughout the entire process."

"This is astounding to the highest degree! The players are called by their own names by the characters in the game," Jupiter wondered. "This, however, is a new variation. How is that technically possible?"

Mr Dungeon put on a mysterious smile. "That was one of the least of our problems. A much more difficult hurdle was to involve the players in the action to such an extent that they completely forget about real life around them and immerse their senses in virtual reality."

"Virtual reality?" Pete looked at Mr Dungeon questioningly. "What does that mean?"

"Virtual reality means as much as artificial reality," the First Investigator took the answer. "It is a computer-generated simulation of a three-dimensional environment that can be interacted with in a seemingly real or physical way by a person using special electronic equipment."

"Exemplary explained!" Mr Dungeon gave Jupiter a pat on the back. "Once you start playing the game, you will literally not trust your feelings."

"This is announced on the poster in your meeting room," Pete knew when to remark aptly. "But how is that possible?"

The programmer walked towards a high corner cabinet and took a metal box from the middle shelf. "I will try to tame your curiosity."

He opened the lid and grabbed three shiny black objects from the box. At first glance, there was something futuristic about them. Mr Dungeon passed them on to Jupiter. "With this gaming helmet and gloves you can dive into virtual reality. They are very easy to use and can be connected to any computer."

"Madness!" Bob ran his fingers into the glove and made a fist. "They're already selling these things in computer stores. But at outrageous prices!"

Pete persisted. "And what do I need this stuff for?"

"In conventional computer games, the action is two-dimensional on the screen," Mr Dungeon explained. "However, when the player puts this helmet on his head, he believes he is immersed in a three-dimensional environment. This is achieved by special goggles which are integrated into the gaming helmet. The illusion of space is based on the stereo effect. With the help of two coordinated lenses, you get two almost identical motifs, but taken from different angles. This creates a spatial impression in the brain of the viewer. The 3-D illusion created in this gaming helmet works according to this principle. In addition, the perfect stereo sound in the headphones makes the spatial acoustics perfect. It's an amazing effect!"

"The layman is amazed, and the expert is surprised," commented Pete ironically. "And how do the gloves work?"

"They contain tactile sensors which uses a microchip to transmit the movements of the hand immediately to the computer," explained Mr Dungeon. "The computer in turn transfers the impulses precisely to the character in the computer game."

"However, if I understand you correctly, this means that players who connect to the Internet to participate in *Sweet Revenge* must be in possession of a gaming helmet and the gloves, right?" Bob asked.

"That's right," Mr Dungeon replied. "In this case we will work with a company that has agreed to offer the helmet and gloves at a fabulous friendship price as soon as the game is released on the Internet."

"And what do they mean by a friendship price?" Pete asked.

“If all goes well, about four hundred dollars,” Mr Dungeon proudly proclaimed, as if the sum was pocket money.

Jupiter blew a surprised whistle. “For that money, a teenager has to deliver a lot of newspapers. Are you sure enough they are willing to pay that much?”

“Guaranteed,” Mr Dungeon confidently reiterated. “A conventional game console is not much cheaper. I looked around the trade—no computer game in the world can match *Sweet Revenge* in terms of entertainment value and 3-D effect. You can confirm for me once you have entered the virtual world of the vampire! I would bet on it.”

“When is the test run supposed to start?” Jupiter enquired. He felt a tingling anticipation in his stomach and would have loved to put on his gaming helmet and gloves immediately to explore the computer-animated fantasy world with them.

“What do you think about the coming weekend?” Mr Dungeon took a quick look at the wall calendar.

“That would be the day after tomorrow,” Bob remarked. “Do you think *Sweet Revenge* can be played out in a weekend?”

“I doubt that, Bob. But ultimately, it depends entirely on your ability to make logical conclusions and decisions at just the right moment. You also need a lot of skill and a good sense of direction.” The programmer lowered his eyebrows. “But I’m pretty sure the vampire won’t have an easy time with you. It may inflict some wounds on you during the course of the game, but it is dealing with a superior opponent!”

“So we’ll come and see you Saturday, Mr Dungeon.” The First Investigator rubbed his hands enthusiastically. “Give our regards to Trulie. We will defeat the vampire and put little Vinton back in his cradle unharmed. The Three Investigators will do our best.”

3. Stay Out of This!

“I can’t believe it! We’ve been surfing the Internet for some time now and I don’t know anything about such games!” The Second Investigator let himself sink into the armchair and looked at his two friends questioningly.

The Three Investigators had made an appointment for Friday afternoon to meet at their headquarters—an old mobile home trailer which served them as an office for their detective business. The trailer is located at The Jones Salvage Yard, which is managed by Jupiter’s uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda.

Little by little they had brought together all kinds of tools and equipment that helped them in their work. It started with their own telephone connection, an answering machine, a fax machine and a well-equipped photo laboratory, right up to a computer with Internet access. Everything was housed in a very small space.

“You are mainly interested in sports, besides detective work, of course. No wonder you know next to nothing about computer games.” Bob had lent his voice an instructive undertone, which made Pete immediately launch a counter-attack.

“If you suck at sports, I won’t talk to you like that,” Pete hit back.

“I’m asking for a little fairness,” Jupiter intervened. “You can’t know everything!”

“With the exception of you, of course, Juve!” Pete couldn’t help himself. “But it’d probably be helpful if you could give us a crash course on computer gaming before we show up at Mr Dungeon’s tomorrow.”

“Excellent suggestion, Pete,” Bob said. “While Juve familiarizes us with his knowledge, I mix us a milk shake. It’s a great comfort.”

Bob took a jug of milk from the refrigerator, poured it into the blender and added a handful of strawberries. For a few seconds, there was an enormous noise—the kitchen appliance was used often and was getting old.

Jupiter made himself comfortable on the carpet and stretched his legs as far away from himself as the space in the trailer allowed.

“First of all, this category of computer games is generally known as Role-Playing Games or in short, RPG,” Jupiter started to explain.

“I suppose it is not anything like that mundane computer chess game that you usually play, huh?” Pete asked.

“Yes, it is significantly different, not that my game is mundane,” Jupiter remarked. “An RPG is a game in which a player assumes the role of a character in a fictional setting. It is called ‘role-playing’ because the player is like an actor playing out the role, in this case, not in a movie, but in a computer-generated environment.

“So the player assumes the role of a character and takes control over many of that character’s actions and decision-making in the game. Actions taken within the game succeed or fail according to a set of rules and guidelines.”

“This may all be quite exciting, Juve,” Pete interrupted the First Investigator in his flow of words.

“You can have a single-player RPG or multi-player RPG,” Jupiter continued. “In a multi-player game, two or more players play the game together, usually as a team. That means that

each player will play a different character in the game, and they go through the computer adventure together.”

“Now explain to me how Mr Dungeon intends to do his thing!” Pete said. “*Sweet Revenge* is supposed to explode onto the scene! But I’m still not quite sure how the players will meet over the Internet.”

“Imagine that the three of us are playing the role of three characters in a game,” Jupiter explained. “Well, we could be sitting around the computer monitor here, each with our own keypad, operating our character on the screen. Now with the Internet, the game can be converted to an online version. This is where we get to play it in our own homes, with our own set of equipment, but our characters come together in the same game.”

“As Mr Dungeon mentioned, players can be scattered all over the world and yet playing interactively,” Bob added. “That’s possible as Internet communications become faster and more reliable.”

“This principle is not that new,” continued the First Investigator. “The possibility of playing with other participants via the Internet has existed for some time. There was once a detective game in which several teams had to solve different tasks. The Internet version was based on a CD-ROM game that was used to play on an individual home computer. If you had Internet access, you could access the game’s Internet site. There you could see who was online at the time, or you could arrange to play the game with other detective teams.

“Each team solves different tasks, and in exchanging the latest information on the whereabouts of the criminal, the goal of catching the crook was always one step closer. The difference between this now outdated detective game and Mr Dungeon’s game is probably that *Sweet Revenge* has improved technology thanks to the gaming helmet and glove.”

“Man, after all this information, my head is spinning,” Pete yawned and stretched extensively. “And what was that Virtual Reality thing that Mr Dungeon told us. I didn’t understand what he said with all that technical gobbledygook.”

“Virtual Reality brings the game to another level,” Jupiter explained. “The clue is in the name—it’s the experience of a world that doesn’t actually exist, but is created by software programs. The software and the accessories like the gaming helmet and gloves combine to give the player the illusion of a more realistic and life-like experience in 3-D. I guess this is all talk and we will only be able to grasp it better once we have taken a sniff of the 3-D spectacle.”

“I agree,” Bob reaffirmed. “In any case, I can’t wait to go vampire hunting!”

“Let’s hope for us and Mr Dungeon that the weekend doesn’t end in a fiasco,” Pete said critically. “What I mean is that we are expecting a super game. I hope Mr Dungeon wasn’t exaggerating.”

“Well, there’s no need to be pessimistic, Pete,” Bob smiled confidently. “It seems to me that Mr Dungeon has the necessary knowledge. I looked him up on the Internet last night. He was involved in the programming of some of the greatest computer games years ago. The successes of *Dragon Quest*, *Hector’s Ride* and *Marvin’s Trap* are largely due to him.

“I’ve never played those games before, but a glance at the sales figures basically says it all. Mr Dungeon is an old hand in the computer industry. Everything he is involved in seems to turn to gold in no time at all!”

“Sounds very promising,” Pete relented. “But how does he make money when *Sweet Revenge* is all over the Internet?”

Bob could only answer this question with a shrug of the shoulders.

“Probably you have to pay to join the game,” the First Investigator guessed and pinched his lower lip. “He will also have negotiated a partnership with the company that supplies the

necessary helmet and gloves. If he also does a lot of publicity in the media, his cash register will ring continuously!”

“Do you think...” The shrill ringing of the telephone interrupted Pete in his thoughts. Before he could finish the sentence, the First Investigator had already picked up the phone.

“The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

Bob could tell immediately from Jupiter’s expression that something was wrong. He quickly pressed the switch on the loudspeaker, so that the two could hear the conversation.

“You should stay out of this,” an electronically distorted voice came out of the loudspeaker. “Don’t take this warning lightly.”

“Well then?” Jupiter asked briefly.

“Should you enter Mr Dungeon’s office tomorrow, you will never leave it alive. As a sign of my warning, look outside your door!”

There was a crack in the line and the connection was off. Without waiting for a reaction from his friends, Bob had ripped open the door of Headquarters and immediately jumped back with a scream!

There was a bat on the stairs leading to the trailer. Its body had been slit open with a vertical cut, from which a red liquid dripped down the steps in thin trickles...

4. Welcome to Virtual Reality

The sun had hidden behind a thick cloud cover on this Saturday morning. The pale light in the deserted streets made the dark building that housed Mr Dungeon's offices look almost like a set from an old black and white movie.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob had not been deterred by the macabre warning of the previous day and arrived punctually at ten o'clock in Santa Ana on Kensington Road. After calling on the intercom, Mr Dungeon's secretary pressed the buzzer and asked them to take the lift to the third floor.

On the way up, Jupiter gave his two partners a few final rules of conduct. "None of us mentions the anonymous caller! That goes without saying. And certainly not the slashed rubber bat! We act as if nothing at all has happened. That is the deal!"

Pete nervously stepped from one leg to the other. "I hope they don't seduce us up there like they did with the bat! I love living and I would be happy to win one or more sports competition in the future!"

"The idea that the lift door will open soon and the secretary will be waiting for us with a hatchet in her hands is quite funny, isn't it?" Despite his tension, Bob could not help but grin.

At that moment, the lift stopped and the door opened. As Bob suspected, they were received by Mrs Bushford. She smiled warmly at them. Instead of a hatchet, however, she held a battery-operated spin duster in her hand. By pressing a button, the duster would rotate back and forth, and the neon-coloured synthetic fibres at the end of the rod would be statically charged to attract fine dust—even in places that were otherwise difficult to access.

"Hello and good morning!" they greeted the secretary in a good mood.

She happily shook hands with them and then moved her duster over the computer keyboard on her desk. "Go straight to the screening room. Mr Dungeon is already waiting for you. You know the way."

Mrs Bushford's light-heartedness immediately carried over to The Three Investigators. Their initial anxiety gave way instantly. They crossed the corridor and found Mr Dungeon in the screening room. He was busy sorting a pile of papers, which he quickly made disappear in a folder when he saw them at the door.

"Hi, boys!" he greeted them effusively. He reached for the folder and held it up demonstratively. "I had to sign off on the outstanding bills quickly. The tax office is currently targeting us and wants to take every dollar that we have. But in the past years, I had more expenses than income! But you have to make those vultures understand that first!"

Jupiter, Pete and Bob didn't really know how to react to this impulsive outburst and only shook hands to greet him. Mr Dungeon had completely redecorated the room since their last visit. The stumbling blocks in the form of cables and multiple sockets had disappeared, and the place had been thoroughly cleaned.

The focal point was formed by three gaming chairs, which reminded them remotely of a pilot's seat in an airplane. The head rest had an oval indentation, which was probably intended as a place for the gaming helmet. On the chairs were the helmets and the gloves. On the armrest of each chair was a joystick. The joysticks were connected to a computer via long

cables, which in turn was connected to two other computers next to Mr Dungeon's computer desk.

The programmer now busily began hammering commands into the keyboard and moved the mouse over the pad. "Can I offer you a snack or a Coke before you go?"

Bob waved thanks to him. "We have prepared ourselves for the trip and had an extensive breakfast. We can start right now!"

"That's good to hear! But before I do, I must issue a warning for safety reasons." Mr Dungeon looked at them seriously. "*Sweet Revenge* generates realistic images and 3-D simulations like no other computer game before. Some people may experience dizziness, disorientation or even nausea while playing."

"Fortunately we are healthy," explained Jupiter. "Let's just hope that this doesn't change drastically during the game."

"Not to worry," Mr Dungeon reassured them. "Pure precaution."

He got up and quietly closed the door. "Before we get started, I'll quickly explain the functions of the gaming glove and joystick that you can use to move around in the virtual world. The glove goes into the hand that you use to hold the sword, and that is usually your dominant hand. We have both the right-handed and left-handed gloves for your choosing. The joystick is operated by the other hand."

He slipped a glove on himself. "Basically, it's very easy. Use the glove to grab items, open doors feel in the dark as you play, and most importantly, for sword fighting and throwing objects. You only need to use your fingers to make the same movements that you make in reality. In the beginning it'll be a bit awkward, but that will fade over time."

"That sounds good," Pete rejoiced, pointing to the joystick. "And what can you do with the joystick?"

"With the joystick, you can move in all directions. Push the joystick forward to move forward. To turn, just rotate it. The A-button serves to call up your menu bar. It stores all the items you receive along the way. You can always fall back on them. When you see the menu on the screen, you can use your gloved hand to tap on the item to select it. Pressing the A-button again will remove the menu from the screen and bring you back to action."

"The sword that is handed to you at the start of the game is always with you throughout the game, unless you lose it. When not in use, you can store the sword in your menu bar. Retrieve it as you would with the other items. In sword fighting, the sword is controlled by the glove, and you use the joystick to lunge forward or backward."

"Now a word about the gaming helmet. You can communicate with each other via the built-in microphone. This is very important! You will need to communicate with each other during the course of the game to develop strategies together."

"That's really all the explanation you need. You'll get the hang of it very fast. You'll also receive plenty of clues from the well-meaning characters in the game, so you'll quickly find your way around. One thing you must never forget. You're a team with one goal in mind—victory over the vampire!"

"One of our easiest exercises, Mr Dungeon!" Bob had taken off his shoes in the meantime and made himself comfortable on the gaming chair. Jupiter and Pete did the same.

"Then have fun! I've already fed the game with your names. I could think that it would be funnier if the animated actors addressed you with Jupiter, Bob and Pete than with any fantasy names."

"Great, Mr Dungeon!" The First Investigator slipped on the glove and put the gaming helmet over his head. Darkness surrounded him. "Are you ready, fellas?"

“All right, Jupe!” Pete’s voice came through the headphones clearly. “How about you, Bob?”

“Couldn’t be better. I’m comfortable!” Bob replied.

“Then let us begin.” Jupiter’s fingers nervously felt for the joystick.

5. Intro

A gentle string orchestra sounded. Slowly the darkness gave way to a diffuse light, from which a dense forest crystallized in a shadowy manner. The viewer seemed to float weightlessly above the scenario while a male voice began to tell the story:

It was at a time when the earth was still populated by brave knights, fairies and dragons that the young heir to the throne, Vinton, was born at Vandenbrick Castle on a stormy night. But his birth was not under a good star. Queen Trulie's husband, King Andris, died that night of a mysterious illness. Without ever having seen his only son, the king's soul disappeared from this earth.

Little Vinton was not yet two weeks old when his mother was also struck by the insidious disease that was already threatening to wipe out the entire kingdom. In order to protect the young prince from infection, he was banished to a shielded part of the castle, where only a nurse took care of his well-being...

Jupiter, Pete and Bob were fascinated from the very first second. They looked through the lenses of the gaming helmet and could hardly get enough of the blaze of colour, the animation and the 3-D technology.

From the bird's eye view they approached an old castle. They felt the slight tingling sensation of the fear of heights in the pit of their stomach. They floated through a small window and now had the feeling of having solid ground under their feet again. They were in a room in which a baby lay in a cradle in front of a crackling open fire. He cried with all his might. Suddenly the door to the room opened and an old nurse came rushing in.

"Vinton, what's wrong?" Worried, the nurse pulled the cradle's blanket back a little. "For goodness' sake! You're soaked with sweat! Yeah, relax. Come into my arms."

But the baby could not be calmed.

"What are you afraid of, Vinton? I'm right here with you."

At that moment, the window pane shattered with a deafening crash! The shards came flying towards the viewer and were so realistic that Jupiter, Pete and Bob instinctively raised their arms.

A ghoul jumped into the room and snatched little Vinton from the nurse in a flash. She cried out loud and tried to stop the fleeing monster—but in vain. With one leap, the ghoul fled with its prey through the window into the night, leaving behind a distraught and frightened nurse.

The heartbeats of the three accelerated many times over. Although Mr Dungeon had already described the beginning of the game to them, the actual experience of the scene was immensely realistic.

The door opened and a guard came rushing in. "What happened, old woman? Why are you yelling?"

"A ghoul! It jumped through the window and kidnapped the young heir to the throne!" Her words were hard to understand because of all the sobbing. "It took Vinton!"

"I'll alert the guards immediately!"

“The mistress will never forgive me!” The nurse began to cry bitterly. “Trulie, how can I make it up to you? It’s all my fault.”

Roughly the guard grabbed the nurse by the shoulder and shook her. “Calm down. Which direction did the ghoul flee?”

“To the east! He fled into the forest of darkness!” Her sobbing wouldn’t stop. “I blame myself so terribly!” The nurse stepped in front of the open fire and looked into the lambent flames with tear-soaked eyes.

Pete felt a shiver run down his back. He kept reminding himself that what was happening before his eyes was not real. And yet he felt a strange compassion.

The picture was slowly faded out and a wooden door appeared before the eyes of The Three Investigators.

“And what happens now?” Bob wanted to know, after the door also failed to open after a few seconds.

The First Investigator raised his left arm. At the same time he saw an animated hand appearing in front of the door, moving synchronously with his real one. “Madness!” it took him away enthusiastically. “Check it out, fellas!”

Suddenly, two more hands appeared in the picture, doubtlessly-without doubt those of Bob and Pete. The Second Investigator reached for the virtual knob, pulled it towards him, and with a squeak the door opened. “Well, Jupe, that’s how to do it!”

The First Investigator spared any further comment, because the open door now gave a view into a small room. They saw an old-fashioned canopy bed in which a middle-aged woman was lying. Her face had a greenish tinge.

“Oops, oops, that doesn’t look good at all,” Jupe noted. “What do you say we go in and see her?”

“Where is your good manners, Jupe?” Pete asked ironically. “We will, of course, observe etiquette!”

“In real life, I would agree with you, Pete. But I don’t think we’ll hurt her feelings if we move closer to her bed.” Jupiter had already energetically activated the joystick and moved towards the bed.

“Stop! Not another step!” the woman croaked. “I have a contagious disease!”

“Jupe, that’s funny!” cried Pete laughing. “If you could see yourself!”

“What are you talking about?” Jupiter wondered, while the woman remained calmly in her bed.

Even Bob could hardly contain himself with laughter. “Pete and I are still at the door. When you walked towards the bed using the joystick, you appeared in our picture! The white doublet and gauntlets adorn you immensely! It’s a barrel of laughs!”

“Do you really think your outfit looks cooler?” Jupiter replied amused. He moved the control stick by 180 degrees and saw two knightly squires in the door frame, also dressed in doublet and gauntlet boots. They had something comic-like about them, and basically only differed by the colour of their clothes.

“No, it’s funny! Red suits you, Pete! And you, Bob, you look great in your clothes, all blue!”

Pete and Bob now also moved towards the bed and immediately they were put in their place by the lady, just like Jupiter before them. “Stop! Not another step!” she croaked again. “I have a contagious disease!”

“Maybe we should take a step away from the woman,” Bob suggested. “It’s possible she might have something interesting to tell us.”

The proposal proved to be reasonable. As they directed the joystick a little further away from her, the woman raised her arms pleadingly.

“Thank you for coming so quickly!” She coughed heavily. “I am Queen Trulie. I need your help!”

At that moment, Jupiter heard a discreet knock on the door to the screening room. He could feel Mrs Bushford scurry along behind him. Despite the gaming helmet he clearly heard her voice.

“I’m sorry to barge in on you, Doe, but I think we’re about to be in big trouble!”

6. Level 1

“It has come to my ears that you are brave and valiant warriors. I place all my hopes on you.” Queen Trulie seemed close to despair. “Hehmathor, the Lord of Darkness, has placed a terrible curse on my family. He killed my husband through an insidious disease that now strikes me down too. And now he had my son kidnapped! His goal is to wipe out our people and take power over Marlon!”

While Queen Trulie lamented her suffering, Jupiter heard the door of the screening room close. Apparently, Mr Dungeon had stepped out into the corridor to his secretary. The First Investigator was torn. On the one hand, he was eager to listen to Queen Trulie’s words—after all, the ruler of Marlon was about to put the fate of an entire empire into their hands. On the other hand, Mrs Bushford’s statement caused his grey cells to rotate.

What did she mean by the words ‘we’re about to be in big trouble’? Were they perhaps related to the telephone warning and the eerie discovery in front of their headquarters? Jupiter had his feet tingling. Should he take off the glove and put the gaming helmet down? Perhaps something revealing could be overheard at the door.

“Hehmathor is a vampire in human form! At night, he turns into a bat and goes hunting for prey. His elixir of life is fresh human blood!” The queen’s voice trembled. “But my people and I knew how to protect ourselves. Crucifixes are placed at every corner of the entire country. The vampire avoids these symbols like the devil avoids holy water.

“Hehmathor himself does not venture near us. But now he has sent his faithful messenger and servant. The ghoul does not fear the crucifixes. He’s gonna deliver Vinton to Hehmathor. I beg you, wrest my son from his power and bring him back to me before it’s too late!”

The queen straightened up with a groan and pulled a long string dangling from the ceiling next to her bed. A mysterious noise rang out and, crunching, a hidden compartment in the wall opened. Inside it were three sparkling swords.

“Take these weapons as a token of my boundless trust. The path leads through the forest of darkness. Find out what Hehmathor is up to with my son, fight your way to his lair. I trust that you will bring Vinton back!”

Exhausted, the animated computer figure sank back into her bed and fell into a deep sleep. The three swords now appeared on the screen in close-up, just waiting to be received by their new owners.

Full of expectation, they reached for the precious weapons.

“Well, brave warriors, are you ready to begin the adventure of your lives?” said the deep male voice. “May the swords and the hope of a whole country give you strength and endurance to save a peaceful people from destruction. Save us from the power of a blood-sucking vampire...”

Three-dimensional printed letters formed from toxic green blobs appeared before their eyes. The words ‘Sweet Revenge’ appeared for a few seconds, accompanied by eerie orchestral music. Then the words disappeared over their heads with a hiss. Suddenly it became dark and nothing could be heard from the headphones in the gaming helmet.

“Is there an intermission now?” Pete asked through the microphone.

“There’s nothing coming,” Bob said.

The two took off their helmets. Astonished, they discovered that Mr Dungeon had left the room. Jupiter was not at his place either. The First Investigator stood listening at the door leading out to the corridor. When Pete and Bob saw him, he put his finger to his lips in warning.

“Tom Beker is getting nervous, Doe!” Mrs Bushford’s angry voice was heard through the door. She seemed to be trying to speak softly, but she wasn’t quite in control. “He needs the money like the rest of us, I can see that! But that is no reason to cause panic. So far everything is going smoothly!”

“Keep your voice down, Lily,” Mr Dungeon warned his secretary. “If this thing blows up, we’re done. Then we can all pack up!”

“It’s all right.” Mrs Bushford lowered her voice. “Nevertheless, you should give him a thorough tongue-lashing. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link!”

Jupiter, Pete and Bob looked at each other questioningly. At that moment the doorbell rang four times in rapid succession.

“That’s him!” hissed the secretary. “What do we do now?”

“Press the buzzer and let him in.” Mr Dungeon kept his cool. “But we should make it clear to him that he cannot stay here for long. He should just briefly tell us what happened. The details can come tonight. Not now. I have to go back in there. The boys are almost done with the Intro!”

The Three Investigators exchanged astonished looks. It was getting more interesting eavesdropping on Mr Dungeon’s conversation. They heard the lift doors open.

“Hi, Tom!” Mr Dungeon greeted the guest casually. “You look like the devil is after you. What is so urgent?”

“Save your stupid comments, Doe!” The man sounded excited. “The damned pigs invaded my apartment. I was just going out when they came. They searched everything systematically, but have not found anything useful! Lucky for me, the vampires missed the case. I kept it in the cloakroom and my old trench coat was hanging there, so I guessed it covered the case up. That was pure coincidence and not at all intended. If they found it, then I would be finished!”

“We can discuss all this calmly, Tom, but not now!” Mr Dungeon tried to reassure his visitor. “The boys are sitting next door and are about to enter Level 1. We should...”

“You’re kidding!” the man interrupted the programmer. Then he stopped. “No. This is not a joke. I can see it on your face.” Excited, he gasped for breath. “This clearly violates our agreement! Why don’t you keep those three out of this? Doggone it! Why do we have to take the risk? And why do you always have to have the last word?”

“How long is a piece of string, Tom?” said Mrs Bushford provocatively. “That old drunkard is driving me crazy! Your work is great, Tom, but we are heading to uncharted waters. If you had put more thoughts about the fruits, we would be closer to the finish line. But it’s not over till it’s over.”

“I must agree with Lily.” Mr Dungeon cleared his throat. “Those vampires attack from all sides! If we can’t settle this, they’ll let us bleed to death. But all the more we have to stay cool and calm down. We don’t have much time left, so let me try my way out.”

“I’ll do my best, folks,” the man said anxiously. “But you have to help me. Hide this case here somewhere. This thing isn’t safe with me anymore!”

Jupiter, Pete and Bob heard an object being placed on Mrs Bushford’s desk. Obviously it was the case in question.

“Don’t worry. I already know an excellent hiding place for it.” Mr Dungeon laughed in agony. “In a few minutes, your source of income will vanish into thin air. No one will find it!

Now get out of here! It's better if the boys don't see you. I'll see you tonight. I'll call you on your mobile phone."

"Thanks, Doe." Mr Beker breathed a sigh of relief. "I feel a little better now."

When the lift doors opened with a squeak and Mr Dungeon said goodbye to his visitor, the three detectives hurried back to the gaming chairs.

When Mr Dungeon entered the screening room, he smiled happily at them as if nothing had happened. Jupiter, Pete and Bob smiled back just as carefree.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, but I had to acknowledge receipt of a package." Mr Dungeon went to his computer desk.

"I'm still totally blown away," Bob enthused. "The Intro was awesome! We were just about to start, especially since we were already in possession of our swords, when suddenly it got dark around us and the program kicked us out."

Mr Dungeon was fiddling with the mouse. "The game is still divided into several files. Unfortunately, this is why there are still interruptions. The individual levels still have to be called up manually, so to speak. But we'll get all this sorted out. If you feel like it, we can go right on."

Jupiter, Pete and Bob agreed enthusiastically. They were curious about the background of the short and strange conversation between Mr Dungeon, his secretary and the mysterious visitor, Tom Beker, but their play instinct had the upper hand at that moment. They put on the gaming helmets, the gloves and laid down in a comfortable position.

High violin music that hurt the ears suggested that the first level would be a tough one. They were now on a path outside the castle that led into a dense forest. Through the treetops they could see the sun slowly setting in glaring colours. The first night birds awoke and the sounds of the nightfall buzzed around their heads.

Jupe moved the joystick to get a brief overview in this strange landscape. Behind them was Vandenbrick Castle, whose drawbridge had already been drawn up. So for the time being there was no turning back on this path.

"Let's go out fighting, fellas," Bob urged his friends.

As he moved forward, rustling footsteps of leaves sounded from the headphones.

"Jupe, Bob! Look!" The Second Investigator pointed to a small hut that lay behind a man-high rock. One of the windows was dimly lit. "I wonder if we'll get a clue." Without waiting for an answer, he ran towards the small door. He reached for the handle and pressed it down powerfully, but in vain. The door was obviously locked from the inside.

Jupiter did not think for long. He approached the door and knocked. 'Tock, tock', it sounded out of the headphones—exactly to the movements the First Investigator made with his glove in the air.

"Just a minute, I'm coming!" cried someone behind the door.

Bob stopped. The voice that penetrated his ears through the gaming helmet seemed somehow familiar to him.

7. Slow Motion

With a squeak the door opened. In front of the three detectives stood a young woman, almost still a girl, with shoulder-length blond hair.

“Hello,” she said timidly, with wide eyes. “You have the magic swords? Then you’re on assignment from Queen Trulie.” The girl did a devoted curtsy. “It was prophesied that three brave warriors from abroad would be chosen to free the kidnapped heir to the throne from the clutches of Hehmathor! You must be those fighters—Jupiter, Pete and Bob. When I look at you, I’m sure you’ll make it!”

“Sure,” Pete replied with conviction. “If not us, then who?”

Bob smiled under his gaming helmet. The voice that breathed life into the young woman in the computer game was unmistakably Mr Dungeon’s secretary. Bob had liked Mrs Bushford’s fresh manner from the beginning, but he found that her voice acting qualities were not the best. Her words sounded eager but unemotional, as if they were read off a page.

“Hehmathor is a beast!” the young woman blurted out. “Whoever enters his shadowy realm will lose himself in the labyrinths and corridors. That’s why I’m giving you something to take with you on your journey that will be of great help in hopeless situations.” She reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out a compass. “Whenever you get lost, this device will show your current location on a map.”

The compass appeared in close-up before the eyes of the three detectives and turned once around its own axis. Then it slowly disappeared into thin air. A message appeared that from now on it could be accessed at any time via the menu bar.

“Night falls.” The young woman threw a worried look out the window. “You better get going. Every second that you let pass could mean the end of the young heir to the throne. I wish you good luck.” With these words she pushed Jupiter, Bob and Pete out of the hut and closed the door.

“So which way do we go?” Pete looked around.

“Didn’t the nurse say the ghoul had fled east?” Bob remembered. “I’m sure we’ll make progress in that direction.”

“Just as well that we have a compass,” Bob whispered. “All right, but to find out which direction to go, we’d better take our bearings from where the sun set. I think that was on the left from where we’re standing now. So now that the sun sets in the west, we actually have to go right.” He set the joystick in motion and followed a wide path that led straight into the darkness.

Suddenly two four-legged creatures shot up from the side. Their eyes glowed in the dark.

“Careful, fellas!” cried Jupiter in horror.

They didn’t have much time to take a closer look. Nevertheless, they recognized that these aggressive creatures were blood-thirsty, starving wolves. Suddenly, their fangs came out.

“Draw swords!” Bob shouted furiously. He called up the menu bar and grabbed his sword. Then he lunged forward energetically using the joystick.

Jupiter and Pete did the same. They flailed around wildly with their swords and gave the attackers some blows. The wolves howled menacingly, retreated a bit after each hit, but

attacked again and again.

“How often do you have to strike them before they finally give up?” Pete shouted angrily. “They’re getting on my nerve!”

At this moment, one wolf attacked the Second Investigator head-on. It jumped at Pete so quickly that he had no time to react. By the enormous impact the sword slipped out of his hand and fell clattering to the ground. The energy gauge at the upper edge of the screen shrank.

“Pick it up!” Bob yelled at him. “Hurry up!”

“Where is it? I don’t see it!” Pete moved the joystick with a sweating hand to search the ground for his sword. “What’s wrong now?” He paused. “I can no longer move normally!”

Jupiter looked fascinated in Pete’s direction. “Your energy drain makes you move in slow motion, Pete! In slow motion! You have to move much slower than we do!”

The wolf came at Pete with open mouth and started to jump again! Instinctively, the Second Investigator wanted to swerve to the left, but he could only move at a snail’s pace. Pete felt like he was trapped in a terrible nightmare.

“What do you want me to do?” he shouted into the gaming helmet.

The impact was even more violent this time. Pete imagined he felt a jolt in the pit of his stomach. The energy gauge shrank and his movements continued to slow down as he fell to the ground.

With a howl and flickering flashes the other wolf meanwhile turned into a flame that went out with a hiss. Jupiter and Bob had sent him to the afterlife with skilful sword strokes.

As he lay on the ground, Pete saw his sword. It lay under thick foliage on the forest floor. In slow motion he stretched out his arm for it. But there, the opened mouth of the wolf was closing in!

“Don’t worry, Pete, we’ll take care of it!” Bob obsessively worked on the joystick as his sword whizzed through the air and hit the animal on the side. It howled in pain.

“I think it needs an extra bonus on its nose!” Jupe rushed to help and swung hard to strike. The stroke hit the mark. After the third hit the opponent was finally defeated. This wolf also howled, flickered briefly and turned into a flame. When it went out, it left behind a strangely glowing blue heart. It set itself in motion and floated slowly towards Pete, accompanied by celestial music.

“Great game!” cried Pete enthusiastically. “What’s happening now?” He had recovered quickly from the fight.

Jupiter and Bob could observe how the heart flew closer and closer to Pete’s figure and penetrated his body. At that moment Pete’s energy gauge filled up and he could move normally again.

“Madness! So that’s how it is,” the Second Investigator noted with a jolt. “When an opponent is defeated, he transforms into energy.”

“But the first wolf kept its energy for itself,” Jupiter remarked, almost disappointed. “My attacker was very persistent!”

“Pretty brutal, the whole thing. But probably still harmless compared to what’s waiting for us.” Bob pointed to the east. “Let’s move on. I’m sure we’ll meet many more enemies along the way.”

“Which I hope will give us some logical nuts to crack. I’m better at puzzles than pointless sword play.” The First Investigator adjusted his helmet, which had slipped a bit during the fight. “But it’s really a crazy game!”

The path through the forest of darkness was long and arduous. At almost every bend a new creature appeared, which had to be transported to the afterlife with skilful sword strokes.

Visual and acoustic effects were not spared. In between, various people appeared who told them trivial anecdotes, but also gave some important clues that were very helpful in the search for the escaped ghoul and the heir to the throne.

Slowly but steadily, the score rose with Jupiter, Bob and Pete. Bob clearly in the lead, Jupiter was close on his heels, while Pete lagged a little behind.

As the first level progressed, it became increasingly clear that The Three Investigators had to follow the ghoul into the castle of the vampire, Hehmator. However, until now there was no indication how to find this legendary hiding place. For this purpose, they had already accumulated quite a few useful items in their menu bar—a witch's spell book containing magical spells to put enemies to flight and open hidden doors, bombs and daggers with which you could aim at enemies from a greater distance, and some vials of an elixir of life. Whoever drank it, the used-up energy gauge would replenish itself. The only thing they didn't really know what to do with was a blank music book, which Pete had found in an old chest.

Hour after hour passed. The three of them fought their way through the virtual world and, to Jupiter's delight, had a lot of tricky puzzles to crack, the clever solutions of which never ceased to amaze them. Nevertheless, the question remained open: Where was the path to Hehmator's castle?

In the meantime, they had entered an underground labyrinth, whose widely ramified corridors lay under a cemetery. Several times they had got lost in it, but with the help of the compass they finally reached a spacious hall where the boss of the first level, in the shape of a giant tarantula, was waiting for them.

"Oh, oh, this opponent will not be a walk in the park, fellas." The First Investigator suddenly felt quite tiny.

"I'll get out voluntarily!" cried Pete in disgust at the sight of this oversized opponent. "Finish this thing without me!"

8. Battle with the Spider

The spider outdid The Three Investigators many times over. The eight hairy legs, which were the size of full-grown tree trunks, twitched restlessly back and forth and seemed menacingly realistic.

Suddenly the claws of the tarantula lowered and reached for Jupiter. In a flash they surrounded him and pulled him up into the air. The First Investigator could literally smell the sickening odour of its breath. He felt that the events were so real.

The tarantula was so fixated on its victim that it didn't notice how Pete and Bob approached it determinedly and drove their swords into the unprotected abdomen with targeted blows. The giant spider reacted with a blood-curdling scream and instantly dropped its victim to the ground. The adrenaline kept its blood pumping.

In panic, Pete and Bob rushed to their helplessly lying friend on the ground and dragged him out of the danger zone.

"Step aside." Bob selected the dagger from the menu bar, and hurled it into one of the six glowing eyes of the monster spider, which was still a little dazed by the first attack. He hit the target! The tarantula shivered, turned red and emitted agonizing sounds. Bob triumphed. Skilfully thrown, the next daggers also hit the mark. The monster slumped down, gasping.

"Bob, you did it! You are the greatest!" Acknowledging this, Pete raised his arm and patted him on the shoulder.

Startled, Jupiter spun around. The giant spider seemed to explode from inside. Little by little it dissolved into its components under thick smoke until there was nothing left of it. Then it got quiet. When the wafts of mist had cleared, an elongated black object appeared in the middle of the hall.

"What's going on now," Pete asked in surprise, while his gaze still hung on the fascinating colour and lighting effects.

"This... this is a casket." As a precaution, Jupiter took a step back. "I'll leave it up to you to open it, Bob."

Before he could react, however, the lid slid to the side as if by magic and fell to the ground rumbling.

"There's probably a vampire in there," Pete feared. "And we have no crucifix to protect us from him. I guess praying is the only thing that'll help now."

"Relax, Pete," Jupiter tried to calm him down. He slowly walked towards the casket and risked a cautious look over the edge.

Suddenly, five horizontal lines floated up from its interior, on which a clef and several notes formed. They formed a melody which was played by an invisible bassoon. The words 'Melody of the East' appeared above the row of notes, while the mysterious music seemed to come from everywhere.

"What's the meaning of this now?" The Second Investigator had just voiced the question when the room suddenly began to roar and vibrate. Long cracks formed in the walls, while with a crunch, the ceiling cracked open and thick boulders pelted down close to The Three Investigators.

"An earthquake!" cried Jupiter in horror. "We have to get to safety!"

“Where shall we go?” Pete was close to panicking. A raging stone hit him in the right arm. His energy gauge began to shrink again and instantly he could only move slowly.

“Move aside, Jupe!” Bob tried to push him out of the danger zone.

But the First Investigator could not get out of the way fast enough. The stone hit him in the shoulder and instantly energy was drained from him as well.

“The only cover we have left is the casket!” In slow motion, Pete moved into the middle of the hall.

Halfway there he was caught up by Bob. “It’ll be tight, but if we squeeze together, we can fit in there!”

Suddenly Bob bounced back. He could not advance. The casket, over which the row of notes was still hovering, seemed to be surrounded by an invisible wall. Even with targeted sword attacks it could not be broken through. More and more pieces of rock fell down from the ceiling.

“I can’t go ahead!” gasped Bob, skilfully dodging the falling rocks. “We’ll be buried alive in this place with no more vampire hunting!”

“Do not despair—ask Jupe!” The First Investigator called up the menu bar and clicked on the music book with nimble fingers. It floated to the casket, opened above it and absorbed the row of notes.

“Whatever that music was about, the invisible wall has disappeared! Into the casket, fellas,” Bob urged his friends to hurry. He was the first to jump into the wooden box and waited impatiently for Jupe and Pete, who climbed in slow motion behind him.

“We’re in, Jupe! Close the lid!” Bob shouted.

The lid slipped on the casket, it hissed, sparkled and sprayed, and then the wooden resting place and its occupants started to move.

“Time jump activated,” a monotonous computer voice sounded. As if in the spin cycle of a washing drum, they were whirled around faster and faster, accompanied by spherical synthesizer music, until they finally felt a strong pull that carried them away into another dimension. Everything turned black before their eyes.

“Closing time, boys!” cried Mr Dungeon. He clapped his hands and typed commands into the keyboard. “You may remove your helmets and gloves.”

Jupiter’s hair stuck flat on his head. He wiped the sweat from his brow. “Congratulations, Mr Dungeon! If I hadn’t experienced it myself, I wouldn’t believe it!”

“My sentiments exactly,” Bob agreed. “The game is the absolute flash! Reality takes a back seat! Only some sequences are quite brutal. For example, it should not be necessary to shoot the tarantula in the eyes with a dagger!”

Mr Dungeon clicked the mouse and shut down the computer. “In my opinion, the tension in the game is not created by brutality. Quite the opposite—it is more the small trivialities that cause the well-known tingling in the stomach area—owl calls, the light of the setting sun, the flying shards of the shattering window pane or the slow-motion effect that occurs as soon as the energy is drawn off. However, surveys have shown that the players of fantasy and action games attach great importance to battle scenes! We just agreed to a compromise.”

“We?” asked Jupiter. “Who is meant by this?”

“Myself and a crew of nearly seventy employees.” Mr Dungeon laughed. “Do you think such an elaborate computer adventure could be created by a couple of programmers? Voice actors, sound engineers, musicians, authors and several computer specialists were involved in this huge project.”

“Sounds like a high cost.” Bob rose and stretched with a yawn. “But the game’s gonna be a hit! Anyone who has tasted blood once will not want to take off the gaming helmet so

quickly. Time flew by!”

“We spent four and a half hours in the virtual world,” remarked Jupiter after a quick glance at the clock. “The players must surely pay a membership fee to log into the game. Not to mention the cost of the helmet, gloves and joystick.”

Mr Dungeon calmly waved him away. “Most young people have so much money at their disposal. The things they can get their hands on is unbelievable! From expensive brand name clothes to electronic gadgets! Nowadays, nothing is left to be desired! We live in a consumer society, boys, where luxury is a priority! And *Sweet Revenge* is a first class high-tech adventure! You can get your money’s worth. But don’t worry, you’re invited.”

“Did you actually take a speaking role in the game?” Bob cleverly steered the subject in another direction. “I recognized your secretary’s voice immediately.”

Mr Dungeon shook his head. “I pull the strings in the background. I prefer that... but Lily wanted to do the young girl’s part.”

“Your secretary doubles up as a voice actor,” Bob remarked aptly. “But why is Mrs Bushford not authorized to receive packages for you?”

“Excuse me?” The programmer winked nervously. “What do you mean?”

“You told us this afternoon that you were called out by your secretary to acknowledge receipt of a package.”

“That’s right,” replied Mr Dungeon succinctly. “So?”

“Nothing,” Bob remained calm. “I’m just surprised that this job is not your secretary’s job. It could happen that you are busy away from home.”

“Hold on, hold on.” Mr Dungeon touched his forehead. “I don’t know what you mean! Of course, Lily accepts the mail for me. In this case, it was just that she...” He plucked his ear and grinned embarrassed. “Sorry, guys, I guess I just blacked out. Where am I with my thoughts? Lily only called me over because it was a cash on delivery package. She didn’t have enough money in her till. It’s that simple!”

“It’s really none of our business either,” Jupiter conceded. “As far as I’m concerned, I’m just dying to get to the second level. Can we play again tomorrow?”

“Sure thing,” Mr Dungeon smiled. “If 10 am, like today, is not too early, you are welcome to join us.”

The Second Investigator rubbed his overstrained eyes. “Let’s go and get something to eat first, eh?” At the same time he lightly tapped Jupiter on the stomach. “Surely playing has made you hungry!”

“Sensible suggestion!” Bob agreed enthusiastically.

The First Investigator drove his tongue over his lips in anticipation. “How about you, Mr Dungeon? Surely you haven’t eaten yet either.”

The programmer slipped into his shoes and took a quick look into his planner. “I have an important meeting in a few minutes. There’s no way I’m gonna be able to blow that up. But it would be my pleasure to give you a treat.” From his wallet, he pulled a banknote and handed it to Jupiter. “Be sure to get a receipt. I can file this with the tax office!”

“Thank you very much!” Jupiter beamed all over his face and made the money disappear in his pocket.

“Tomorrow I’d love to come along!” Mr Dungeon opened the door and stepped out into the corridor.

In the outer office, Mrs Bushford was sitting at her desk reading a book. There was nothing to be seen far and wide of the case that the unknown third party had brought.

9. More Threats

The waitress in the steakhouse had just taken the order of the three friends when Jupiter went over the agenda. He knocked discreetly on the wooden table three times. "Court is now in session, fellas."

"Huh?" Pete fanned himself with the menu. "You've been bitten by a tarantula! I would like to enjoy my meal in peace and I am definitely not in the mood to celebrate detective deductive powers!"

"What fine language that this gentleman uses today," noted Jupiter irritably. "But as long as the food is not on the table, there is opportunity to discuss some inconsistencies that I have noticed. There are circumstances which must be directly related to each other."

Pete knew that any resistance was futile. Once Jupiter had set his mind to expound his theories, one had to bow to his decision.

"Make it short," he replied, ready to compromise. "Preferably in telegram style. But as soon as the steaks start fizzing, the meeting will resume at Headquarters."

"Agreed." Jupiter lowered his voice. "First of all, we should consider ourselves lucky to have left Mr Dungeon's premises alive, despite the threat of the unknown man. There is probably no longer any doubt—Mr Dungeon, Mrs Bushford and this visitor, Tom Beker, are involved in an obscure matter! The case, which was hidden in the programmer's office, must contain something valuable. Some people are so keen on it that they would even break-in for it."

"And what does that tell us?" Pete wanted to know.

"In telegram style, probably that Jupe wants to find out what's in the case," Bob took the answer.

The First Investigator nodded. "Right. And for that we need to find the hiding place."

"You must be out of your mind!" Pete got excited again. "So far we have only stuck our noses into other people's business after a client has officially instructed us to do so! We can't just go searching Mr Dungeon's office like this!"

"Unofficially, he has already given us the assignment." Jupiter didn't let up. "He enlisted the help of The Three Investigators to help us take down a vampire. And there seem to be a lot of those bat monsters fluttering around in this case—in the virtual as well as in the real world! Think of the animal on the steps of Headquarters and of the people who have searched in vain for the mysterious case in the apartment of this Mr Beker. Mr Dungeon's visitor called them vampires too!"

"From this point of view I must agree with you," Pete admitted thoughtfully. "And the strange conversation of our three suspects in the lobby, which consisted mainly of hieroglyphics, also contributes to the mystery. How long is a piece of string?"

"A piece of string is twice as long as half its length," Jupiter said.

"Huh?" Pete remarked, puzzled. "What kind of stupid answer is that?"

"That is actually a brilliant answer... if you have its length," Jupiter said. "But the answer is not the issue here. The phrase 'how long is a piece of string' means that the answer is not known and it will be difficult to find given the information available."

"And what is your super brain trying to tell us?" Pete asked, irritated.

“If we knew what Mrs Bushford really meant by her superficially incomprehensible statements, we might already have the solution in our hands,” Jupiter said. “As it is, there’s something explosive behind what they said. I’ll stake my detective’s honour on it.”

“But we can’t possibly go to the secretary and tell her outright that we overheard her conversation in the lobby,” Bob interjected sceptically, “especially since that Tom Beker was not at all pleased with our visit. What did he mean when he said that our presence violated the agreement and that they had to take the risk?”

Jupiter pinched intensively on his lower lip. “Questions upon questions, and one mysterious utterance follows another. The three are in financial difficulties. I think we can deduce that from Mrs Bushford’s statement ‘Tom needs the money like the rest of us’. If you consider what Mr Dungeon said about the tax office at our first meeting, the suspicion is reinforced. I almost suspect that there is a criminal mastermind at work!”

“I agree,” Bob said. “As Mr Dungeon said: ‘If this thing blows up, we’re done’.”

“We’re going around in circles like a revolving door!” the Second Investigator expressed his concern. “Where do you suggest we start investigating this case, Juve?”

“I’d love to give you an answer to that question right now, but at this very moment, I’ll stick to our deal. Since the waitress with the steaks is already heading for our table, we’ll postpone the conversation until later at Headquarters!”

After their visit to the steakhouse, Jupiter did not miss the opportunity to make a short detour to the pastry shop. He had two bags of apple turnovers packed, which when back at Headquarters, he gobbled the contents up with great appetite. While Bob had the computer started up, Pete poured out mineral water in glasses.

“Maybe this time the Internet will help us,” Bob said. “With a little luck, the search engine will give us some information with the keyword ‘Tom Beker’.”

“You have mail,” a monotone female electronic voice came out from the computer’s speaker as soon as the computer was connected to the Internet.

Curiously, Bob clicked on the icon of the e-mail inbox and he saw a new e-mail with the subject: ‘He who will not hear must feel’. The detective gave a surprised whistle.

“Who sent us an e-mail?” Jupiter wanted to know. He bit off a big chunk of the apple turnover.

After getting the full e-mail, Bob read aloud:

You have ignored my warning. This is not a game. Resistance and disobedience lead to destruction. I will drill my fangs into your neck and suck you dry to the last drop. Your bodies will drop to the ground like empty shells.

The Vampire.

Bob turned to his friends. “Now we have it in writing.”

“Take it easy,” Jupiter licked the icing off his fingers. “What e-mail address did our joker leave?”

“Unfortunately, it’s of no use to us at all,” Bob said resignedly. “I can see that the sender put in an invalid address! I don’t think I could reconstruct who sent the e-mail.” Bob closed the e-mail application and clicked on the search engine.

“To me this is not a joker,” Pete determined. “Whoever sends us a threat again, I think he has a screw loose! Such people are capable of anything! We can’t ignore that!”

"If you're suggesting we cancel Mr Dungeon's assignment, you won't have my support." Jupiter looked the Second Investigator seriously in the face. "This has never happened in our previous cases! We're gonna stay on the ball!"

"Please... You think we should just ignore these warnings?" Pete objected.

"The threats are meant to intimidate us, no doubt," Jupe said. "But I think I'm pretty sure I know who sent us this e-mail!"

"Please..." Pete repeated. "I'm getting tired of these guessing games! Just say who you think it is."

The First Investigator put on an arrogant face. "Think about it. Mr Dungeon sent an e-mail to invite us to his office. He gives us the assignment to subject his newly developed computer game to a test run.

"The next day, an unknown person warns us that we should not visit the programmer in his office. Failure to do so could result in death. As additional intimidation, he places a bat on the steps of Headquarters. Both warnings are ignored by us. We go to see Mr Dungeon and promptly a person appears in his office who is absolutely horrified by our presence!"

"Tom Beker." Pete got up from his chair and walked restlessly around the narrow trailer. "Now that you mention it, it's clear to me. But what motive could cause him to intimidate us like that? He sends us two threats! What's the point of this?"

"If I knew that, the case would be solved." Jupiter pondered feverishly. "However, there is little point in informing Mr Dungeon of these incidents. To us, he will play the innocent. After all, the three of them are in cahoots."

"Why don't we just go for it and tell Mr Dungeon point-blank that we overheard the conversation in the lobby?" Pete suggested.

"With a probability bordering on certainty, he will cook up a bunch of lies—just like that cash on delivery package that he supposedly had to receive."

"Here's something!" Bob suddenly shouted, tapping his finger on the monitor. "Although only one entry, but it's still something. The search engine found a movie review from the *New York Times* on 17 September. Listen to this:"

Get Ready for Sleepless Nights

The new horror flick Vampire Flash, based on the book of the same name by the successful author Rick Anderson, is not for the gentle minded. Besides the excellent actors, Melissa Paradise as a scientist in a gene laboratory and Tony Franklin as a supervisor suffering from anxiety, this solidly-implemented story is also provided with breathtaking special effects that are unparalleled—especially the flight simulations of the genetically manipulated bats, created by Tom Beker, the multiple award-winning special effects creator.

Conclusion: Go watch it. Let yourself be captivated and suffer from subsequent nightmares. Age rating: 16 and up.

"What does that tell us?" Bob asked.

Jupiter came closer to the screen. "That we are probably right about our suspicion against Tom Beker. He sent us the threats. As a trick expert in the movie, it was easy for him to create this deceptively real replica of the slashed bat. He probably even made it himself. Perhaps this animal is a remnant from *Vampire Flash*."

“The special effects might be something but the movie was a flop,” Pete interjected. “It only ran for a week, and only in the smallest cinemas. Then it disappeared from the scene without any fanfare. The movie itself was also not worthy of video distribution.”

“This could also explain why Mr Beker is suffering from a shortage of money,” Bob surmised. “If, for example, he has signed a contract in which he is only involved in the financial success, things look bad for him in this respect.”

Bob proceeded to print out the article.

“So what do we do now?” Pete wanted to know.

“Good question,” Bob said.

“We remain neutral,” replied Jupiter. “We’ll pretend that nothing has happened. For the time being, I don’t think we’re in any serious danger from Mr Beker. Nevertheless, we will be vigilant and keep our eyes and ears open tomorrow!”

10. The Drunkard

The next morning, ten minutes before the agreed time, Jupiter, Pete and Bob took the lift up to Mr Dungeon's office. When the doors of the lift opened, Mrs Bushford welcomed them as usual. She seemed to be a little confused and hurriedly grabbed a shiny black raincoat from the coat hook. "You're here. I thought it was Doe... uh, Mr Dungeon. I'm surprised he's not here yet."

"We could have waited the ten minutes downstairs in the car," Jupiter replied politely. "But in this uncomfortable weather, it is not very easy sitting in the car."

"No problem, boys! I just have to run down to the baker's. Ordered some sandwiches over the phone. Mr Dungeon hopes that today you will complete the much trickier second level." She laughed. "You're in desperate need of some nerve food."

"Did it get late at your boss's meeting yesterday?" Bob casually asked.

"Indeed. Mr Dungeon sat at his computer with a colleague from the early evening until well after midnight," Mrs Bushford replied. "*Sweet Revenge* is in its final stages, so overtime is inevitable."

"Hope he didn't oversleep," Pete feared.

"Don't worry! I spoke to him on the phone half an hour ago. He's already on his way here. He should be arriving at any moment." She pointed at the door. "You can take a seat in the meeting room until then. The screening room is still locked. There's only one key and the boss always carries it with him!"

The secretary gave them a charming smile and entered the lift. Jupiter, Pete and Bob waited until the doors had closed. Then they looked around the office.

"Perhaps we only have a few minutes," whispered the First Investigator, barely audible. "But we should seize the opportunity. There's gotta be that damn case hidden somewhere!"

"This means spread out and look for it," Pete said.

"You got it, Pete," Jupiter said. In doing so, he stepped to a closet and quietly opened the doors.

"And what do we do if the case is locked up?" Bob took a framed picture from the wall and looked for a hidden safe.

"I am hoping that it is in an obscure place rather than being locked up," Jupiter replied. "If it is locked, we can't do anything about it—with the short time that we have now."

The First Investigator found that the cabinet contained only file folders. Disappointed, he pulled some of them out to see if there might have been a secret compartment behind them. There was none.

"I'll look around the meeting room!" Bob went next door.

Meanwhile, Pete had set his sights on Mrs Bushford's workplace. The drawers of the desk seemed to him to be big enough to store a case. Apart from a vast number of different office items, such as pens, writing paper, envelopes and mailing envelopes, nothing was to be found here either.

"Jupe!" the Second Investigator exclaimed. His gaze fixed at the waste basket. He reached in and pulled out some pieces of paper. When he placed them on the desk, Jupiter curiously looked at them.

“What have you got there?”

“A photo—neatly cut into several pieces with scissors.” Pete assembled some of the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle. “That’s Mr Dungeon over there. And there’s another person on this piece here!”

Bob stepped out of the meeting room and joined his friends.

“There’s definitely no case in there! Apart from the leather couch, the desk and the executive chair, there is nothing there! Even a blind man with a cane could see that!” Interested, he looked at the photo pieces. “What have you got there?”

In the meantime, Jupiter had put most of the cut pieces together. The photo showed Mr Dungeon, who had put his arm amicably around an older, pot-bellied gentleman in a serious business suit. The apparently tipsy bald man was holding a filled glass in his hand. The half-empty bottle in the background of the picture made it easy to see what the glass contained. ‘Scotch Whiskey’ was emblazoned on the label in gold lettering.

“What do you think? Could the man next to Mr Dungeon be Tom Beker?” Pete looked at the bald man closely.

The First Investigator had to pass. “It is difficult to judge. After all, all we know is his voice.”

Bob narrowed his eyes and looked at the photo more closely. “I recognize this fat man! I’m sure of it!”

“Then don’t keep us in suspense! Who is this guy?” Impatiently Pete drummed his fingers onto the desk.

“The man’s name is Bowfield, Timothy Bowfield. He is director of the Jefferson Bank!”

“How do you know him?” asked the Second Investigator in surprise.

“Sax Sendler Music Agency is a client of this bank,” Bob explained as he worked part-time on and off there. “Many times I had to make bank transfers for him there, get money or deliver letters. I have already spoken to the director personally several times. It’s him, no doubt!”

At that moment the lift doors opened. Mr Dungeon stepped out and looked into their frightened faces. There was not the slightest possibility left for them to let the photo pieces disappear inconspicuously back into the trash.

“Ah... Good morning,” Jupiter stammered sheepishly. “We’re just passing time, practising our puzzles.”

Pete turned red. Mr Dungeon frowned.

“Mrs Bushford is getting sandwiches from the baker,” Bob tried to defuse the tense situation. “I was about to throw a tissue in the waste basket when I saw the clippings in it.” He pointed to the composite photograph. “A great challenge for us—games of skill and patience are practically our hobby.”

“Really?” replied Mr Dungeon sceptically. He bent over his desk and took a look into the waste basket. “There’s not a tissue in there.”

Bob froze inside. He searched his trouser pockets and thanked goodness, he found something. Demonstratively he pulled out a crumpled paper tissue and threw it into the waste basket.

Jupiter went straight to the attack. “Are you also a customer of Jefferson Bank? But judging by the cut up photo, I would assume you are.”

Intricately, Mr Dungeon peeled off his jacket and threw it over the back of the chair. Only then did he reply to Jupiter’s question.

“That drunkard can go jump in the lake!” His eyes sparkled. “Not one cent more will I put in his bank! It’s none of your business, but Timothy Bowfield is to be blamed for the fact

that I've owed the salary of my crew of seventy people involved in the production of *Sweet Revenge* for six months!"

"What do you mean?" Pete asked as he was slowly recovering from his shock.

"I've known Timothy since I was in school. Back then we were the best of friends. We stuck together like glue!" Mr Dungeon stepped behind the desk and sat in the office chair. "However, after we left school, we lost track of each other. Timothy moved to Miami to study business administration. He had already firmly set his sights on the goal of becoming a bank director. I, on the other hand, was interested in computer technology and worked in a software company for many years until I became self-employed and developed my first computer game.

"Well, to make a long story short—about two and a half years ago, Timothy had finally made it! Having worked his way up to be a bank director in Miami, he changed branches and returned here. You can probably imagine the joy of reunion after all those years."

"And what happened then?" Jupiter asked impatiently.

"As luck would have it, I was at this point in time looking for sponsors who would pre-finance my planned adventure game *Vampire Castle*."

"*Vampire Castle*?" Pete interrupted. "You must mean *Sweet Revenge*?"

"*Vampire Castle* was the original working title of the game," Mr Dungeon succinctly explained. "Anyway, Timothy was so enthusiastic about my plans that he granted me a million dollar loan. For this I had to give my entire fortune as security through my signature. From that day on I was able to start the project. I think you can imagine that a huge weight has been lifted from my mind. I wasn't responsible for myself alone, but for an entire staff."

"But then something went wrong?" Jupiter asked.

Mr Dungeon reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out his pipe and a pouch of tobacco. "It is not so simple. The development of the game was only getting longer and longer because my crew and I came up with hundreds of ideas and technical refinements that we wanted to put into the vampire story. This understandably led to enormous time delays. The planned eighteen months, in which the game should have been completed, quickly turned into two years. There was no end in sight and the loan had to be increased. But then Timothy suddenly got cold feet. He came to me here in the office and urged me to complete the game."

Mr Dungeon lit the pipe and puffed in a frantic rush. "How shall I explain it to you? While Timothy insisted on foregoing the technical and content improvements, I felt that a higher quality of the game promised greater success and therefore better sales! But he wouldn't hear of it. He gave me a four-week respite. If the game was not completed after this deadline, the bank would be forced to withdraw from the loan agreement.

"In the meantime, I had to mortgage all my assets. Timothy put a knife to my throat and turned off the money tap. Since then, I've been on the brink of ruins. And I have also lost confidence in our friendship. My former friend is a loan shark, his bank is a piranha tank! I never thought that he would jeopardize my entire existence and my life. I have almost completed *Sweet Revenge*. But every hour I wait for the bailiff at the door and the fear grows every day that I will be turned off!"

Mr Dungeon paused and then continued: "Yesterday morning, Timothy and I had a final discussion. I even humiliated myself so far and begged him to help me out of my difficult situation with his private assets. Timothy Bowfield is one of the richest bankers in the country."

"What came out of yesterday's discussion?" Jupiter asked.

Mr Dungeon's hands clenched. "He asked me to transfer all my rights to the computer game to him. In return, he would immediately relieve me of all my debts and grant me a one-time payment of \$100,000!"

Pete kept his mouth open in amazement. "Did you agree to the deal?"

The programmer struck the desk with his fist in an excited manner. "Am I an idiot? That was blackmail. Timothy believes in my success! I just grabbed him gently by the arm and led him into the lift."

Bob had to grin at this performance. "A wise decision, Mr Dungeon. You'll do fine without the baldy!"

Mr Dungeon breathed deeply. Then he reached for the photo snippets and crumpled them up hatefully in his hand!

11. Level 2

For a few seconds, Mr Dungeon remained motionless at his desk. Then he gave himself a jolt, went to the screening room and opened the secured door with a special key. Determined, the programmer sat down at the computers while he asked Jupiter, Pete and Bob to take their places on the gaming chairs.

“To make virtual reality seem even more vivid today, I should actually open the window, let the cool air in and turn down the heating. The second level leads mainly through cold underground passages. But considering the risk of catching a cold, let’s leave it at a comfortable room temperature, shall we?”

Jupiter was surprised. Mr Dungeon seemed like a different man. With a mischievous grin, he turned on the computers and gave a friendly wave to his secretary, who had just returned and stuck her head through the door.

“If you want to take a break, there are sandwiches waiting for you in the kitchen!” Mrs Bushford threw her hair back. “By the way, three letters just came for you in the mail, Doe.” Skilfully she threw the envelopes at him one after the other. “So, boys! Have fun.” She shut the door.

“Ready for battle, brave heroes?” The fast fingers of the programmer tapped the keyboard.

Bob raised his thumb. “We’re ready, sir!” They put on the gaming helmets and gloves.

“Let’s go!” Mr Dungeon started the program.

Darkness. A hissing sound came out of the headphones, followed by a loud rumble. Then it got quiet.

Bob groped his way through the darkness with his glove and encountered resistance at head height. It was a wooden ceiling! He pushed it aside and glaring sunlight blinded The Three Investigators.

“We’re still in the casket!” Pete recalled. With the help of the joystick he risked a cautious look at the surroundings. “The crate transported us to another place. We are in a mountain range!”

Jupiter got out of the casket. At the end of a path he discovered a signpost, but its inscription was indecipherable from a distance. Stones crunched under his feet as he hurried towards it. Pete and Bob followed him.

One metre before the sign, the First Investigator came to a halt. “I cannot believe it! We could have been killed in the first level! The casket apparently serves as a teleporter. We have landed in the Mountains of Death.”

“Vampire Gorge, 3 km,” Pete read aloud. The arrow pointed west.

“Let’s go now,” Bob said, glancing sceptically at the sky. “In the virtual world, the sun seems to set faster than in reality. It’s getting dark.”

“Where did you get that cross all of a sudden?” Astonished Pete looked at the wooden crucifix in Bob’s hand. It was about the length of a pencil.

“I just found this in the casket. Shall I put it on the item menu?”

“Where else?” Pete said. “This thing will definitely keep the vampires off our backs. Save it fast!”

Bob pressed the A-button and placed the crucifix in the menu right next to the witch’s spell book.

“Fellas!” Jupe narrowed his eyes. In the distance, something had moved. At first, it was just a single dot. Slowly it formed into a figure that descended a slope and slowly approached them.

“Just a harmless peasant woman,” Pete noted with relief. He was glad not to face an aggressive tarantula.

He walked towards the old woman, who carried a bulky basket of brushwood on her back.

“I see that you are strangers here,” she said in a weak voice. “Surely you are wandering. Have pity on a poor little mother and help me carry the basket. The load is so heavy, I can hardly feel my back.”

She stood so shakily on her legs that she was about to fall over. Nevertheless, she managed to put the basket down without any help from them. “If you go with me, I will be eternally grateful.”

“What are we gonna do, fellas?” Bob asked. “Are we going to follow her?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Jupe said. “We can proceed but we have to be careful.”

They followed the old woman for quite a distance towards Vampire Gorge. There were no incidents for a good distance. Meanwhile, the sun was already submerged behind the mountains. The full moon rose and drew eerie shadows in the landscape.

Suddenly the old woman’s lips narrowed to a narrow line. “This path leads straight—to hell!”

With devilish laughter, she presented four pointy fangs and built herself up in full size in front of them.

“A vampire!” Pete startled. Horrified, he retreated.

In a matter of seconds, the old woman went through a frightening transformation. Her scrawny body took on the dimensions of a warrior, her snow-white hair turned fire-red and her hands mutated into wolf-like claws.

“You dare to follow in Hehmathor’s footsteps? I serve the Lord of Darkness and will destroy you with all my might!” Bright lightning shot out of its claws and hit the ground close to The Three Investigators.

“Step aside, Bob!” Jupiter jumped up to the beast and gave it a huge blow in the side with his sword.

By attacking with his weapon, Pete managed to score another hit, which made the beast turn around with a scream.

“You’ll pay for this!” the beast bellowed. With bloodshot eyes, it grabbed the Second Investigator by the collar, pulled him towards it and approached his neck with sharp teeth.

“Strike it, Jupe!” Bob cheered Jupiter as he clicked the menu bar to activate the crucifix. “Let’s give this a try!”

“Hurry up, fellas, this lady seems to have a hell of a thirst!” Pete tried desperately to fend off the open mouth of the vampire. “Get a move on! Come on!”

Jupiter placed himself close to Bob. Skilfully he let the tip of the sword rush into the body of his opponent. It squealed shrilly. The First Investigator had to laugh involuntarily. But the beast was not yet defeated!

“Look!” Bob clasped the crucifix with both hands and held it up.

At the sight of the crucifix the eyes of the vampire widened. Screaming it backed up, let Pete fall to the ground from its clutches and slowly disintegrated to dust under Jupiter's unyielding sword strokes.

"We'll have peace now. It was pretty stubborn." Bob put the crucifix back in the menu bar and took a breather.

But a breathing space was apparently not granted to them.

From the foot of the mountain, an abandoned carriage approached, its horses snorting and coming to a halt in front of them.

"We should probably sit in it," Pete assumed after the door of the carriage swung to the side as if by magic. "Please, after you." With an elegant bow he let Jupiter and Bob go first.

The Second Investigator had not yet completely closed the door when the carriage started moving. The black stallions galloped at a blistering pace over countless bridges and along the hilly mountain pass until they finally stopped after a breakneck ride.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob climbed out of the carriage and looked around carefully. A dark, dilapidated medieval castle rose before them. The surrounding ditch had dried up.

Pete suspected that their arrival was being watched. Two white ravens crouched on a ledge, watching their every move with suspicion.

"Hehmathor's castle," whispered Jupiter devoutly. "This must be it. This is where the ghoul took little Vinton. Shall we go in? The drawbridge is already lowered. Apparently, they're expecting our visit."

Jupiter, Pete and Bob had completely forgotten the real world around them. They concentrated entirely on finding their way through the virtual castle grounds.

As the game progressed, it turned out that Bob was the best fighter of the trio. No opponent was spared by the blade of his sharp sword. It was unbelievable how he could send one attacker after the other to the afterlife without getting hit himself. His energy gauge remained at the highest level continuously.

Pete, on the other hand, did not like the aggressive ambush attacks. He saw himself more as a silent connoisseur of the vampire epic. While they wandered through the narrow corridors and spacious halls, he could hardly get enough of the atmospheric rooms, the overwhelming blaze of colour and the almost realistic-looking animations.

The time flashed past. They had already spent five hours in Hehmathor's castle without tracking down the lord of the castle himself, let alone the kidnapped heir to the throne.

In return, they learned from a talking owl that Hehmathor had long since left his domicile and had fled to another dimension. The night bird kept silent about how and where to follow the trail. With rapid wing beats, the owl disappeared through a castle window.

Towards the end of the second level, another tough opponent was waiting for them—a huge cobra surprised them in the castle tower.

The extremely responsive snake was very difficult to handle. With its slippery tongue it turned the floor into a slide and brought Jupiter, Pete and Bob down quickly. And before they knew it, the snake swallowed them up!

"That's disgusting," Pete shuddered as he found himself inside the narrow snake body. "And everything is slippery!"

The energy gauge of all three of them shrank.

"Pull yourself together, Pete!" Bob announced magnanimously. "With the bombs, we'll make it!" He selected from the item menu some bombs and fired them in quick succession. It cracked and hissed!

Additional blows with the sword finally sent their adversary to the afterlife. There was nothing left of the huge cobra. Instead, a black casket materialized in the middle of the room,

as in the previous level.

From the interior rose another row of notes, whose dramatic melody was played by a bassoon. The words ‘Melody of the West’ appeared at the edge of the screen.

“I’m afraid it’s gonna get rough.” Jupiter noticed thin wisps of smoke slowly rising from the ground.

“I guess Hehmator is angry because you killed the cobra, Bob!” Pete quipped.

“Then the earthquake from the first level was also caused by him.” Bob threw a glance to the side and looked into blazing flames. “Fire! The exit’s on fire! This vampire lord is seriously trying to smoke us out!”

“Now it’s time for another squeeze, fellas. Get in the box!” Jupe shouted.

“What are you waiting for? The whole castle is on fire!” A jet of flame touched Pete’s arm. “Ouch!” He winced. “I’m losing power!”

“Hang on! First, the melody must give us room!” Jupiter pressed the A-button. They watched spellbound as the notes were sucked into the music book, hissing. The ‘Melody of the West’ has been saved.

“Damn! The box is already catching fire!” Pete started to sweat.

“Get in!” Jupiter took over. He jumped into the casket, waited until Pete and Bob were with him and quickly closed the lid.

Darkness and dead silence surrounded them.

“Madness!” Bob lifted the gaming helmet and removed the glove. Exhausted, he rubbed his eyes. “I’m totally exhausted.” He yawned. “But the game is mad fun! Congratulations, Mr Dungeon.”

The programmer seemed to soak up the compliments like a sponge. Proudly he leaned back in his armchair.

There was a knock at the door.

“Yes, please?”

Smiling, Mrs Bushford came in. “Patty’s on the phone, Doe. She asks about her voice acting fee. Should I put the call through or tell her you’ll call her back?”

Mr Dungeon jumped up. “I’m coming over, Lily. Guys, excuse me for a second.”

The First Investigator waited until he left the room. Then he curiously approached the computer desk. On the mouse pad, he found the opened letters that Mrs Bushford had handed to him a few hours ago. One lay opened in front of him. The First Investigator could not resist the temptation. In no time at all, he skimmed over the text—and was startled.

12. The Bank Letter

The letter was from Eastwood Bank in Mount Valley and the recipient's address was Mr Mitchel Cryder, 18 Southfire Street, Unit 9, and marked 'Personal/Confidential'. It read:

Dear Mr Cryder,

The following direct debit from your account was rejected because you have not provided us the authorization to do so. We recommend that you settle the claim by other means in order to avoid possible disadvantages.

This was followed by the details of the unsuccessful transaction. The letter was signed by W. Lesley of the Eastwood Bank in Mount Valley. According to the date, the letter was already four days old.

Jupiter was itching to read the other two letters as well. But instinctively he turned away and joined Pete and Bob at the gaming chairs. The decision was right, because a few seconds later, Mr Dungeon came back into the room.

"Judging by your reaction, you haven't had anything serious to complain about in the game so far. That is worth a lot to me. When do you want to continue?"

"First thing tomorrow after school!" Jupe beat his friends to it. "We could be here at 2 pm."

"That's fine with me!" Mr Dungeon looked at his watch. "What do you say we go out for dinner now?"

"We'd love to, Mr Dungeon, but I'm afraid we'll have to postpone our dinner," Jupiter said while Pete and Bob exchanged questioning looks. "My aunt promised to cook something special for us today." The First Investigator pulled a face. "Stew. We're not particularly keen on that. But a promise is a promise. How would tomorrow suit you?"

"Darn! Again, I can't!" Mr Dungeon said.

"We'll find another date then," Jupiter comforted himself and looked at Pete and Bob imploringly. "Until we track down Hehmator and free Vinton from his clutches, we'll have plenty of opportunities to pursue common interests."

"Time flies! You're already halfway through the game. But after the fourth level, I'm inviting you for Chinese food."

"Only four levels? Isn't that short," Pete complained indignantly. "It's hardly worthwhile buying the necessary accessories. It's expensive fun."

"Think ahead, boys. Should *Sweet Revenge* hit like a bomb, we will of course develop a sequel!" Mr Dungeon remarked. "Joystick, glove and gaming helmet are a long term investment!"

Mr Dungeon, despite his financial woes, was quite optimistic. "Cross your fingers, boys," he added quietly, though. "The game will go on!"

“What’s the idea, Jupe? I’m hungry!” Pete started the engine of his MG. “Mr Dungeon generously invites us to dinner, and you’re spouting nonsense about Aunt Mathilda and her stew!”

“We’ll eat later,” Jupiter interrupted him. “Let’s get out of here first.” He pointed out the side window. “Something strange is going on in there. Either Mr Dungeon and his secretary think we’re daft or they are acting very rashly.”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at, Jupe, but it’s clear that being daft is not the case,” Bob said. “After all, Mr Dungeon hired us because he heard about our detective skills.”

“To test the game, Bob,” Pete braked the car at a red light.

“Do you know what was in one of the three letters Mrs Bushford gave her boss?” The First Investigator looked into the questioning faces of his friends.

“Am I psychic?” Nervously Pete played with the clutch. “You’ll tell us for sure in a minute.”

“The letter was from Eastwood Bank in Mount Valley,” Jupiter said.

“Great!” Pete reacted calmly. “And what does that tell us?”

Before Jupiter continued, he took a short pause for effect. “The letter from Eastwood Bank was not addressed to Mr Dungeon, but to a certain Mitchel Cryder, 18 Southfire Street, Unit 9. Underneath it was written in bold: ‘Personal/Confidential’.”

“That’s odd, though.” The traffic light turned green and Pete stepped on the accelerator.

The First Investigator was irritated to discover that the experiences from virtual reality were still haunting his mind and strangely influencing his necessary powers of concentration. He had to call himself to order inwardly in order not to lose his focus.

“In any case, this Mr Cryder was informed in the letter that a certain amount of money could not be withdrawn from his account because he has not provided the authorization to the bank to do so.”

“How did that snoop of yours ever get it out?” Pete wound down the side window a little.

“There wasn’t much to sniff about!” Jupe reacted indignantly. “Mr Dungeon had left the letter opened on the mouse pad. Then the question came to me: Why does a personal and obviously confidential letter end up at a completely wrong address and is read by an unauthorized person, that is Mr Dungeon?”

“Unauthorized? Who’s to say that this Mr Cryder isn’t perhaps friends with Mr Dungeon?” Bob asked. “Maybe he went on vacation and asked the programmer to open important mail for him. Or perhaps Mr Dungeon has the power of attorney to handle Cryder’s bank accounts.”

“That’s possible,” Jupiter remarked.

The Second Investigator signalled left. “Nevertheless, my sixth sense tells me what you intend to do next, Jupe.” He turned left and drove into a small side street.

“So?” Jupiter asked suspiciously. “Are you finally a psychic?”

“Not anywhere near. I just use simple and logical deduction. There is only one thing in the world that can make you turn down an invitation to dinner—and that is your curiosity!”

“Excuse me?” Jupiter asked.

Skilfully, the Second Investigator steered his MG into a narrow parking space, turned off the engine, left the car and gallantly opened the door for Jupiter. “May I ask you gentlemen to step out of the car?”

“Where are we?” the First Investigator asked. “I was lost in thought and I didn’t pay attention to where you were going.”

“18 Southfire Street.” Pete pointed quietly to a five-storey apartment building across the street. “Surely you want to be clear about whom this Mitchel Cryder is, whose letter—

authorized or unauthorized—was opened by Mr Dungeon. Now's your chance."

As they got nearer, Bob noticed that the curtain was moving behind a window of unit number 10 on the ground floor.

"And how do we proceed?" Pete asked as he crossed the street.

"If Mr Cryder opens up, I'll think of something spontaneous." Determinedly Jupe walked towards the partially glazed front door and took a close look at the name plate. His eyes glowed. "In any case, fellas, the address on the letter is correct. So from the name plate, Mitchel Cryder lives here."

Facing the intercom, he pressed the button without hesitation. He remained restlessly standing on the doormat. Nothing happened.

"Ring again," Bob asked him.

But even after a long wait, there was no response.

With a squeak, the window of unit number 10 opened. A curtain was pulled to the side, behind which an elderly lady appeared.

"Are you here to see Mr Cryder?" Her eyelids were painted green and formed a stark contrast to her pink lips.

Jupiter nodded.

"He's not here. He is so rarely seen here that I almost have the impression that he does not live here anymore. What do you want with him? May I take a message for Mr Cryder?"

"Nothing for him personally. We're doing a survey for our group of students, with the topic: 'How well do you know your neighbour?'" Jupiter could lie with a straight face.

"I've only seen Mr Cryder a few times, although he moved into his apartment months ago." The lady tinkled with her eyelashes. "He's a little spooky, very secretive and shy."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Pete moved closer to the lady at the window. A cloud of exotic-smelling perfume struck him.

"He doesn't look you in the eye. He's always looking somewhere else—usually at the floor, and he wouldn't let me invite him in for a cup of coffee either." She laughed. "A very neat man and an elegant appearance, at least as far as his clothes are concerned. And the rimless designer glasses made him look intellectual. Only the full beard, I think he should shave it off." She shook herself, her necklaces clinking. "I like men who are clean-shaven."

Bob tried to extract more information from the lady. "When was the last time you saw Mr Cryder here? Maybe he went on vacation or on a business trip?"

"Last seen a week ago, if you ask me," she recalled, "Something is wrong here! Every now and then, mail ends up in his mailbox—but it is also cleared regularly."

"By Mr Cryder?" the First Investigator asked.

"I can't say. As I said, I haven't seen this man for seven days. Even though the lights in his apartment have been on ever since." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Sometimes, I have a strange feeling. For all I know, Mr Cryder could have been lying dead in his apartment!"

13. Level 3

Pete had slept extremely badly the previous night. In his dreams, he was hunted relentlessly by vampires. Also the lady from 18 Southfire Street had crept into his nightmares. He couldn't remember the details the next morning, but poisonous green eyelids with glued-on eyelashes in a horrifying devil's grimace had made him wake up several times.

"Just don't think of mentioning Mr Cryder's curious neighbour in Mr Dungeon's presence," Jupiter admonished the Second Investigator. "She's a strange lady. I hope she keeps her promise not to tell Mr Cryder about our visit."

"If that full beard ever shows up there again," Bob interjected.

Punctually at 2 pm, The Three Investigators stood outside Mr Dungeon's office on Kensington Road as agreed. Their trip to Southfire Street yesterday had raised further questions to which Jupe, even after several hours of pondering, had no comprehensible answer. Even Bob's search in the telephone directory and on the Internet had been unsuccessful. The enigmatic Mr Mitchel Cryder was untraceable.

Silently Jupiter, Pete and Bob took the lift up to the third floor. As the lift doors slid to one side, Mrs Bushford met them as usual. She was wearing jeans and a turquoise angora sweater and looked a bit nervous. Nevertheless, she received them in her usual friendly manner.

"Well? How was school?"

Pete shrugged his shoulders in embarrassment. "Not so good. I couldn't stop thinking about the game during class."

"Same here," Jupiter agreed with him. "I've never had trouble concentrating before. One could almost call it addiction."

"Hi, boys!" Mr Dungeon entered the lobby. "I'm curious to see if you'll pass the third level. It requires the greatest attention, boundless curiosity and the highest intelligence!"

"Well, we would take on that challenge, sir," Bob replied confidently.

"Would you like some refreshments first? I have them ready for you." Mrs Bushford pointed to a tray of various beverages.

Bob waved thanks. "We're eager to start now..." He looked at Mr Dungeon questioningly. "Well, where does the third level get us? The exciting end of the second level leaves a lot to be desired."

"That will not be revealed, lads! I'm keeping my fingers crossed for you." Doe Dungeon directed them to the screening room. He couldn't wait to take Jupiter, Pete and Bob into the virtual world.

Within a very short time, they were sitting on the gaming chairs, fully equipped, and looked concentrated into the darkness before their eyes.

A distant drop could be heard. Pete groped for the casket lid above his head, felt a resistance and pushed it upwards. They drifted through a dark sewer, and a digital writing that flashed before their eyes revealed that they were in 21st century Los Angeles. Slowly they approached a faint light that shone through a manhole cover from above.

Pete felt anxious. "You hear that?" An indefinable fluttering noise penetrated his ears.

“Heads down!” cried Bob shrilly.

A horde of bats shot at them aggressively!

“Swords out!” Bob was in his element. Ready to defend, he drew his sword.

“Let’s try the crucifix first!” Jupiter pressed the A-button and reached for the wooden crucifix on the menu bar.

The reaction was prompt. The vampires froze in mid-air and retreated from the symbol. In the slowly drifting casket, Jupe drove the bats bit by bit into the daylight. With deafening squealing, the emissaries of the vampire lord crumbled to dust.

“Not bad, Jupe,” praised Bob.

“Where are we drifting to?” Pete wondered. He was already quite dizzy from the slight rocking in the casket. The sewerage system made a bend and branched off a few metres further into four different directions.

“Let fate decide,” Bob said. “Let’s see where the current takes us.”

The casket passed the intersection, turned and drifted through the channel leading to the north. Footsteps could be heard very clearly and they were approaching quickly. The echo seemed to come from all sides. Pete ducked.

“Friend or foe?” Bob asked.

On the narrow path next to the sewer, a woman stumbled towards them, wrapped in a flowing cape. She stopped, panting. Her face was snow-white and expressed great tension. Only now did she seem to see the three.

“People?” She retreated, puzzled. “How can this be happening? Where are you from?”

“Ah... good question.” Bob searched for a suitable answer. “Probably from the past.”

The woman faltered. “Then you must be Jupiter, Bob and Pete! Good gracious! Turn back immediately. Hehmator is waiting for you!”

Her gaze fixed on the crucifix in Jupiter’s hand. She turned away with an outcry. “Put that thing away! It burns me!”

“Jupe!” Pete bumped into the First Investigator. “She’s a vampire!”

“What else did you expect down here?” Jupiter never let the undead out of his sight.

“I have something important to tell you! But first hide the cross!”

“Don’t trust her, Jupe,” Pete warned. “She’s just out for your blood!”

Without listening to him, Jupiter placed the crucifix in the item menu. “We’re listening.”

Distrustfully, the woman looked at his hands. “All of Los Angeles is populated by vampires. We have almost exterminated humanity and made it our own. But without fresh human blood, we are threatened with extinction. We urgently need supplies! For this reason, Hehmator had the young heir to the throne abducted from the past. Blue blood flows in his veins. It’s highly concentrated. Just a few drops are enough to feed hundreds of us.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Bob asked impatiently.

“Hehmator found a method that enabled him to make countless copies of the king’s son. In a few minutes, his slaves are to begin production.”

“Genetic engineering,” Jupiter muttered to himself. “A hot topic.”

“The Lord of Darkness has chosen me to suckle the young heir to the throne with bat’s milk,” continued the woman. “Otherwise he would have starved and that would have ruined Hehmator’s plans!”

“Hence the diaper with the traces of bat droppings!” Pete grinned. “So Vinton is still alive!”

“Pretty wicked, Mr Dungeon,” Bob said. “That’s something to think about!”

The woman looked around worried. “Flee while you have the chance! Hehmator is the spawn of evil! I will not allow him to carry out his barbaric plans. Mankind is almost extinct

and now he wants to ensure the survival of his species. But I stole the key to eternal life from him. The Queen has sent you to return the baby to her unharmed. You must not disappoint her!” With these words she reached into her wide cloak and handed Jupiter a white bundle with trembling hands.

“My goodness!” The First Investigator looked at a sleeping baby in amazement. “That’s Vinton!” His heartbeat quickened.

“Quiet!” The woman put her finger to her lips. “Hehmathor will soon notice my actions. Without the blue blood of the heir to the throne, we will perish. But I will finally find my peace. I have waited for this day for a hundred and seven years.” Again she looked around anxiously. “Don’t waste time! May you find your way to freedom unharmed.”

“Find your way to freedom,” Pete repeated excitedly. “Easy to say in this maze! Can’t you give us a clue?”

But the woman had already turned away.

“There’s no use asking questions, Pete,” Bob said. “Technology has not yet progressed that far. What the lady has not been programmed to do, she cannot do.”

Bob looked at the baby in Jupiter’s arms. “The little one is sleeping soundly. Let us quickly retreat. If Vinton wakes up and starts bellowing about being hungry, we’re gonna look pretty stupid. First, we are unable to give him food...”

“... and secondly, he would lure the vampires with his cries! So let’s say goodbye quickly from here and off through the middle!” Jupe said as he looked to the left, where the woman had hurried off to. He saw her disappearing just around the corner.

“Get out of the casket and follow her!” hissed Jupiter.

Together they got out of the wooden box and ran to the corner around which the woman went. But far and wide there was nothing more to be seen of her.

“I don’t believe it! She just vanished,” the First Investigator noted in amazement and held Vinton tightly in his arms.

Although The Three Investigators were proud to know that the young heir to the throne was already in their care, it was still an ordeal to carry the baby in their arms during the arduous search to escape. Jupiter, Pete and Bob shared this burden. They took turns every ten minutes. Nevertheless, their arms became heavy very quickly.

The Lord of Darkness had already noticed the treachery. He sent a whole army of ghouls after the three of them, who did everything they could to protect the baby. But Bob’s well-aimed sword strokes unerringly sent the attackers into the afterlife. As a reward, a futuristic laser gun appeared before his eyes. Pete, however, was unlucky. When he tried to help Bob fight the ghouls, he had lost his sword. The Second Investigator was now unarmed.

After several hours of wandering around in vain, dozens of attacks and tricky puzzles, the fear expressed earlier finally came true—Vinton awoke from his deep sleep. At once, he began to scream at the top of his lungs.

“Now we are in a mess!” In vain Jupiter tried to silence the baby. “I’m afraid now we’ll have to deal with Hehmathor himself. The Lord of Darkness will not let us off easily.”

“Here’s a door!” Bob jumped up, pulled the knob and looked in wonder at a small pantry. Two shelves were filled. On the upper one there were four rectangular boxes with labels on them—rice, salt, flour and sugar.

“Aha!” said Bob with satisfaction as he deciphered the blurry label of a jug on the second shelf. “There’s the milk!” He reached for the jar, soaked a piece of cloth in the milk and let the heir to the throne suck on it. Vinton fell silent instantly. He repeated the procedure several times until the little one pushed the cloth off him. The heir to the throne thanked him with a

loud burp. Bob saved the jug as a reserve in the item menu. The baby had already fallen asleep again.

“Here’s another door!” Pete pointed to a niche. “What do you think? Shall I open it?”

“Go ahead.” Jupiter approached curiously when the hidden entrance opened with a creak. It led into a comfortable room where the walls were covered with tapestries. In one corner, a crackling open fire was burning. In front of it sat an exotic-looking beauty with flowing hair on a wide cushion.

“Women are clearly in the majority in this game,” smiled Bob. “I feel like a rooster in the hen house.”

“Good evening.” The woman looked at the door in an encouraging way. “You look like brave warriors to me. Won’t you come in?” Slowly she rose and came closer.

Pete entered with the sleeping baby in his arms behind Jupiter and Bob. “Can she be trusted?”

The door slammed shut!

14. The Brain-Teaser

“We’re trapped!” Bob shook the handle in vain.

A terrifying transformation took place before the eyes of the three. The head of the exotic woman grew six more heads on long necks. The grimacing faces gave off an eerie sound.

As if hypnotized, the First Investigator stopped. “So I guess we’ve come to the third big opponent. Now it’s time to stay cool!”

“You’ll never get out of here alive!” One of the heads snapped at Jupiter. “I will destroy you!”

The First Investigator jumped aside and activated his sword. “We’ll see about that! Put the baby down and help us, Pete!”

“Help?” Pete shouted in amazement. “I lost my sword earlier.”

“Then we’ll both have to get out of it, Juve!” Bob’s sword whizzed through the air. “In the name of the Queen!”

One of the heads began to laugh hysterically. “You fools! Don’t you know who you’re dealing with?”

“Don’t tell them!” hissed another head on the side.

“My mission is to destroy all warriors who are too close to the target!” A spray-sparking jet shot out of her mouth. Bob was able to dodge just in time.

“Attack the heads!” Pete cheered his friends on. He grabbed the pillow in front of the fireplace, laid the baby on it at a safe distance and clicked on the item menu. He quickly reached for a dagger.

Again the beast spat fire. “Is it hot enough?” A scornful laugh echoed across the room.

Obsessively Jupiter lunged at the beast. He gave several blows to the back of one of her seven heads. Furiously the beast reared up. “I’m gonna strangle you!”

Her head shot forward hissing and wrapped the long neck around Jupiter’s body. He could hardly breathe and his energy gauge decreased alarmingly. In panic, the First Investigator shook the joystick.

“It’s no use to you!” She looked at him with hatred. “That’s no use to you! Now you’re in for your last moments.”

Pete hurled seven daggers into the huge body. But that only seemed to tickle the multiple-head beast. Jupiter already saw his end coming as a brave knight.

“Do you have a last wish?” The grimace changed back into the face of the former beauty and smiled sweetly. “I’m open to anything... And I’m hungry!”

Her head shot forward in a flash!

This was the moment Bob had been waiting for. He jumped towards the beast, thrust the sword into its side and fired at its heads with the new laser gun. Not a single shot was missed. All that remained was a dense cloud of smoke.

“I hate weapons,” Bob remarked dryly. “But these are things I have to do for my friends!”

“I will be eternally grateful to you,” gasped Jupiter. The excitement was still in his bones.

Pete pointed to the sleeping baby and laughed. “The world may end. But the young heir to the throne doesn’t seem to care. He’s asleep and quiet as a mouse.”

In that very moment, a free-floating row of notes formed again in the air. A bassoon played an evocative melody. The words ‘Melody of the North’ appeared in the scene. After the music had faded away, Jupiter clicked on the menu bar, let the melody disappear into the music book and pressed the save button.

“Where is the casket?” Pete looked around searching.

“We let it drift away in the sewers, we idiots,” Bob cursed.

A mocking giggle made him spin around. “Fruit, gentlemen? Guaranteed not genetically engineered!” A small dwarf figure with a pointed cap and a long beard stood in the room all of a sudden. He held out a small tray with all kinds of fruit.

“Who is that?” Pete wanted to know. “Snow White’s faithful companion?”

“You’re in a lot of trouble.” The dwarf tugged at his beard. “We have something in common. Because I am also faced with a difficult problem. May I introduce myself? I am Oinki Hinki, supreme magician of the dwarf people.”

Politely he pulled the cap off his head. “Queen Trulie gave me the order not to let you out of my sight in the search for the young heir to the throne. I kept my word. And after you have successfully completed your mission, I will conjure you back to our mythical world unharmed.”

“No way our mission is fulfilled,” Jupiter whispered to his friends. “Until Hehmathor is defeated, the game is not over! Finally, there is a fourth level.”

“But back to our problems,” Oinki Hinki continued. “You urgently need transportation to get you back to Vandenbrick Castle, while you must help me win Oinki Minki as my wife.” In his anticipation the dwarf ran red. “She is the most enchanting being among our people,” he enthused. “We could have been happily united for a long time, if Oinki Poinki had not given me a very difficult task. He is Oinki Minki’s father and will not consent to our marriage until I have brought him the explanation of an almost unsolvable mystery.” Desperation was written all over his face.

Jupiter’s face, however, brightened. “It can’t be that tricky. Let’s have it!”

Oinki Hinki scratched his head. “Oinki Poinki’s family consists of seven people—two parents, two grandparents and three children. Oinki Poinki told me to share eight apples and six bananas equally among all the family members. If I do not succeed, he will marry his daughter Oinki Minki to Oinki Toinki—a master builder who builds ugly mud huts all over the dwarf village.”

He stamped his foot furiously. “The deadline is at sunrise! If you can’t help me, I will lose Oinki Minki forever!” He swallowed. “Once you’ve deciphered the secret, you can use the Control Pad to enter the solution in a grid in the Items Menu!”

The First Investigator closed his eyes with concentration. Eight apples and six bananas divided by four adults and three children.

“The question remains to be clarified what is meant by ‘share equally’,” Bob philosophized.

“Why do you think I’m carrying this cursed tray around with me? For better logical understanding!” Oinki Hinki snapped his fingers and seven dwarves appeared in the middle of the room. Three of them were a little shorter. Obviously, they were supposed to represent the children. When Oinki Hinki flicked again, eight apples and six bananas floated away from his tray, forming two rows above the dwarves.

“It may be because of my lack of intelligence,” Bob mused, “but logic suggests it can’t be shared equally.” Even the pictorial illustration that Oinki Hinki had conjured up in the room, which was now gradually fading, did not give him the necessary insight.

Jupiter was still thinking sharply and pinched his lower lip while Pete was thinking aloud about the available options. "Either the adults each get two apples and the children each get two bananas, or each child gets..."

"... One apple, the adults get one apple each and one is left," Bob added. "And what about the bananas? How many do the adults get?"

"Stop it!" Jupiter intervened. "How to twist and turn it? There can be no talk of justice in your deliberations."

"In any case, each of the seven people will get an apple," Pete did not let himself be thrown off track. "Either cut the eighth apple into seven equally sized pieces and distribute them to the seven people or..."

A violent splash interrupted the debate. Pushed open by a flush of water, the door broke off its hinges. Brown watery sewage flooded into the room and covered the entire floor within seconds.

"Get out of here!" Pete cried in panic. Instinctively, he ran towards the exit. He had just reached the door when a grille came tumbling down. The water already reached their knees. The dwarf is already up to his stomach.

"Oinki Hinki! Get us out of here!" Pete shook the bars in vain.

"Solve the puzzle! We can't leave this place before then," the dwarf threatened stubbornly.

"Think of something, Juve!" Bob's brain cells were running at full blast. "We're already losing power!"

"For God's sake, the baby!" Pete went through it like an electric shock. "In all the excitement, I completely forgot about him!"

Worried, he surveyed the room and breathed a sigh of relief. The pillow on which the heir to the throne still slept calmly, floated like a boat on the surface of the water. Oinki Hinki, who was already up to his neck in the water, rowed his arms towards it and kept the pillow afloat.

"I hope the baby doesn't slip down!" Bob wanted to rush towards the pillow. But the loss of energy reduced him to slow motion speed.

"We can hardly move! Our lifeblood is about to be used up!" The First Investigator already couldn't move from the spot. His energy was used up to the last drop.

"Eight apples and six bananas, shared equally between four adults and three children," Oinki Hinki croaked.

Then it turned black before their eyes.

"What?" Bob was indignant. "This is just unreal!"

Sweating wet, they ventilated the gaming helmets and pulled the gloves off their damp hands. Mr Dungeon watched them from his computer desk.

"How... what's going to happen now?" Pete was visibly irritated. "Is the game over for us?"

Mr Dungeon laughed forced. "No! Once you've found the right solution and entered it into the grid, the biggest challenge is yet to come, boys! The decisive battle against the Lord of Darkness—Hehmator!"

Jupiter rose stiffly from the gaming chair. "Well, you've certainly come up with something tricky, Mr Dungeon. Well done! I must confess, I've got a lot on my mind right now. I don't see what this dwarf is getting at."

"Can I borrow a pen and paper?" Bob approached the desk.

"Sure." Mr Dungeon opened a drawer.

Bob immediately began to perform various mathematical calculations on the notepad. Finally, unnerved, he put the ballpoint pen aside. "Impossible to arrive at a reasonable conclusion. These combinations of numbers cannot be divided equally."

"Then the only thing that will help us is a flash of inspiration like Einstein." Pete stretched his arms, tired.

"Boys, join your wits," Mr Dungeon urged them. "The Three Investigators have solved every mystery yet!"

"Good things take time," replied Jupiter brashly. "Quality work takes time. You know all about that."

"Can't you at least give us a little hint?" Pete asked nervously.

Mr Dungeon shook his head. "It'll spoil all your fun! It's best if we sit down next door in the meeting room and you can think about it carefully. That comes with a Coke and cookies! Well, what do you think of that?"

The First Investigator pulled his shoulders up regretfully. "We'd love to, but tomorrow morning we have a lot of class work to do and we have not yet prepared ourselves."

"It's all right, boys! Just come by as soon as you have come up with a plausible solution! But call first, okay?"

"We won't let you down, Mr Dungeon." Jupiter slipped the jacket over his head and turned to walk. "You can count on one thing—The Three Investigators have solved every mystery so far."

"I'm curious about that. Because if, contrary to expectations, you really don't come up with the solution, I'll have to come up with an easier brain-teaser." The programmer shook their hands to say goodbye. "Still, boys, you've done very well so far!"

"We're heading to uncharted waters," Jupiter looked Mr Dungeon right in the eye. "But it's not over till it's over."

Mr Dungeon went pale.

15. Jupiter Solves the Puzzle

Jupiter took a look at the wall calendar at Headquarters. "The autumn holidays begin next Monday. By the weekend, or more precisely by Friday afternoon, the confused trio will have to be patient, that is, if we have solved the fruit puzzle by then."

"I don't understand." Pete pepped his shoes in the corner, planted himself in the armchair and put his feet on the table. "What are we confused about?"

Bob rolled his eyes. "Jupe was not talking about us. He meant Mr Dungeon, his secretary and this Tom Beker. Is it true or am I right?"

"Bull's-eye. They are a highly contradictory team," Jupe said.

"Could you be a little more specific?" the Second Investigator asked.

"Once you take your feet off the table, I'll be happy to elaborate."

Pete pulled a wry face and changed to the cross-legged position. "Let's hear it. Above all, why the three of them and not we have to be patient. After all, we are the ones who have to solve the puzzle in the game!"

"On the surface, it looks like that but on closer inspection, I have the suspicion that it's not we who are fishing in troubled waters, but Doe Dungeon and company!" The First Investigator reached into a can of peanuts and shoved a double portion into his mouth.

"We need more details, Jupe, if we're to follow you." Bob spread out in full length on the carpet.

But Bob and Pete had to be patient until Jupiter had finished chewing and swallowed.

"The three of them, especially Mr Dungeon, are in dire financial straits. As the programmer himself told us, he owes his seventy employees their salary for six months. Then a stranger shows up trying to keep us away from Mr Dungeon."

"Tom Beker!" Bob exclaimed. "The guy we don't know what he looks like."

"Right, Bob," Jupe said. "In the conversation we overheard, he urged Mr Dungeon to keep us out of a certain matter. In the end, he can only have meant our job as game tester for *Sweet Revenge*."

Jupiter reached into the peanut can again. Disappointed, he noticed that it was almost empty. "He deposits a case with the programmer, where the obviously valuable contents we still have no knowledge of, and he tells something about taking a risk."

"What does that mean?" Pete asked as he was still in the dark.

"This brings us to the core of our discussion. It all boils down to the fact that the three are after some 'thing' that is directly or indirectly connected to Timothy Bowfield, the bank director."

Bob drove up in surprise. "What makes you think of that, Jupe?"

"It's obvious," Jupiter replied. "Mr Dungeon tells us that Mr Bowfield has a problem with alcohol."

"I think he has more of a problem without alcohol," Pete threw in.

"Anyway, another proof is the cut-up photo of the bank director clearly drinking too much."

"But what do Timothy Bowfield's drinking problems have to do with the aforementioned 'thing'?" Bob wanted to know. "Where do you see the connection?"

Jupiter chewed the last peanut. "Mr Dungeon referred to the bank manager as a drunkard. This expression is not exactly familiar. However, if you remember that Mrs Bushford also used this term in the mysterious conversation, you should be able to understand my conclusion."

"Wait a minute..." Bob tried to remember the words. "Yes, I remember now. When Tom Beker came in, didn't Mrs Bushford say something like 'that old drunkard is driving me crazy'?"

"Quoted verbatim," congratulated Jupiter. "So the three of them were talking about Timothy Bowfield, who we now know is responsible for their financial difficulties."

Bob continued: "I also remembered that Mrs Bushford saying that had Tom Beker put more thoughts about the fruits, they would be closer to the finish line."

"Now what has all this got to do with fruits?" Pete wondered.

"And this is exactly where the problem is," Jupiter said. "There is something sinister about fruits and how they relate to the whole thing. I can't imagine what, but Doe Dungeon, Lily Bushford and Tom Beker are all eager to solve the fruit puzzle in the computer game."

"What?" Suddenly Bob became wide awake again. "Are you saying that Mr Dungeon himself does not know how to share apples and bananas equally among the dwarves?"

The First Investigator nodded. "Didn't you see how he was waiting to hear the solution from us?"

"But he designed and programmed the game himself. How can he not know the answer? That's a paradox!" Bob exclaimed.

"Not at all, Bob," Jupiter tried to make the matter plausible. "At the end of the third level, he put in a puzzle but not the answer. As long as there is no answer, the game stops there. So if we give him the answer, he will programme it in for the game to proceed."

"Sure." Bob grabbed his forehead. "During the game he sits next to us at his computer table."

"Jupe, you're right!" Pete jumped out of the chair.

"Why do you think the fruits in the game could not be shared equally?" Jupe exclaimed. "From their conversation, it seems that Tom Beker was asked to solve the puzzle. He didn't manage to do it, so Mr Dungeon got us into the picture, which in turned angered Mr Beker."

"Will we ever figure it out?" Bob shook his head. "This puzzle cannot be solved mathematically."

"It is really very confusing to me," Pete said. "We have an unsolvable fruit puzzle, a millionaire bank director, a hidden case with unknown contents and a programmer who wants to make it big-time with his cyberspace adventure! And where does Mitchel Cryder fit in all of this? Has he got anything to do with Tom Bowfield who is trying to squeeze Dungeon's company out of business?"

"Yes, it's a problem trying to link them together, Pete," Bob smiled at the Second Investigator's thoughts. "What do you think, Jupe?"

The First Investigator looked expressionlessly into the void and was lost in thought. "The task cannot be solved mathematically... Squeeze..." Suddenly it went through him like a bolt of lightning! "Fellas, you won't believe it, but that's the key to the puzzle... that must be it!"

"What are you talking about?" Bob exclaimed.

"You gave the first clue, Bob, and Pete got to the point!" Jupiter's hands began to shake with excitement. "The puzzle is actually mathematically impossible to solve... because it was not meant to be solved that way. In fact, the number of fruits and people are actually irrelevant!"

“Excuse me?” The Second Investigator let himself be flushed into the armchair in disgust. “Could you please be more specific?”

“You said the word ‘squeeze’, Pete! That’s the thing! If you put the bananas and apples into a fruit press or juicer and squeeze them, you get fruit juice! Then there is no problem to share it equally between four adults and three children! J-U-I-C-E. If we had entered those letters into the grid, and with Mr Dungeon programming it in the game, we would have advanced to Level 4.”

“Jupe... You’re a genius! Bob clapped his hands enthusiastically. “This consideration is absurd and plausible at the same time. It has to be!”

“I never would have thought of that in a million years!” Pete exclaimed. “I take my hat off to you!”

“Nonsense, Pete, you don’t have one at all.” Jupiter remained thoughtful. “I wonder what Mr Dungeon and company are up to, and there’s only one way to find out.”

16. Off with the Disguise

It was early on Monday morning. Jupiter had called Mr Dungeon on Friday afternoon and left him the answer to the puzzle on his answering machine.

Since eight o'clock Jupiter, Pete and Bob sat huddled together in the MG, hidden in a side driveway, and watched the house of the programmer. Finding the programmer's home address had been easy for The Three Investigators. He lived in a small apartment with a front garden in Santa Ana, not far from his office.

"If you'd at least tell us what you're up to, we'd know why we're freezing ourselves here." Shivering Pete pulled the zip of his leather jacket up all the way.

"Be patient, Pete." The First Investigator had wrapped himself in a cuddly woollen blanket at the back seat. "As yet, it is only a hint of suspicion. But if my suspicions are confirmed, I will let you know soon enough."

Bob slipped restlessly back and forth in the passenger seat. "Shadowing consists mostly of waiting, waiting, and waiting again. Do you really think it's worth it?"

"Heads down!" hissed Jupiter and peered carefully out the back window. "Someone's leaving the house!"

Pete had turned the rear-view mirror so that he had the front door and garden gate directly in sight. "Who is that?" he whispered irritated. "I don't know this man. He's carrying a briefcase. Is that Tom Beker?"

"You ask questions. Can you explain to us how to respond to that?" Bob pulled out his binoculars and fixed on that person. The bearded man in the grey suit was about forty years old and looked like a businessman. Confident, with quick steps, the man hurried down the street and headed purposefully towards a taxi stand.

"Strange guy," Bob muttered. "The full beard makes him look almost like a turnip. And in addition those designer glasses. It's a pretty weird contrast."

"Full beard and designer glasses?" Pete hesitated. "Where have I heard that before?"

Jupiter's blood was boiling. "18 Southfire Street."

In the meantime, the man had boarded a taxi, which immediately started moving and drove away towards the city centre.

"That was Mitchel Cryder," Bob yelled. "Step on it, Pete!"

Pete started the engine. "And what do we do about Mr Dungeon? Shouldn't one of us stay here and do guard duty? After all—"

"Drive away!" Jupiter interrupted him. "The taxi is almost gone!"

At a record-breaking speed, Pete manoeuvred them through the dense rush hour traffic towards Mount Valley. He always kept his eyes on the taxi in front of him.

"How come you're always one step ahead in our investigation, knowing things in advance that nobody else really know?" Pete turned his head to the back seat.

"Look ahead and concentrate on the traffic," Jupiter replied briefly. "This may seem strange to you, but Mr Cryder's appearance here surprised me as much as it did you."

The Second Investigator stepped on the brakes. The taxi had pulled over to the side of the road and stopped in front of a pharmacy. Right next door was a branch of Eastwood Bank.

They were lucky. The customer parking lot of the financial institution still had some parking spaces. Pete headed for the nearest space and parked.

“Let’s go!” Jupiter urged them to hurry. He opened the car door and ran towards the bank building. A gardener was just watering the palms with a hose. Mr Cryder avoided the water stream. Apparently, he was worried about his good suit. Thanks to this circumstance, Jupiter was able to intercept him before the entrance.

He spoke directly to the bearded one. “I have waited a long time for this encounter. I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The man did not say anything. He reacted unwillingly and looked away in bewilderment. At that moment, Pete and Bob came up from behind.

Jupiter made a wide gesture of his hand that almost seemed like an invitation. “You may seem surprised to find us here. But I think we have something important to talk about.”

The eyes of the man behind the glasses began to twitch nervously.

Jupiter smiled bindingly. “May I introduce you to my friends.” Then he turned to Bob and Pete. “This is Mr Mitchel Cryder... also known as Mr Doe Dungeon!”

17. Sweet Revenge

“What you are going to do now, Mr Dungeon, I would think very carefully if I were you. Or do you seriously want to risk your freedom?” The First Investigator put his hand on his shoulder in a calming manner.

Mr Dungeon did not move. He remained stiff and tense.

“What’s going on here?” Pete blurted out. “Are we getting in on the act?”

Bob nodded in confirmation.

“The moment of truth has arrived!” Jupiter pointed to a nearby park bench under a palm tree. “After you, Mr Dungeon.”

The air was stifling when the programmer, followed by The Three Investigators, took heavy steps towards the bench.

As the wind blew threateningly, Mr Dungeon resigned himself to the bench. He wiped his damp forehead with a handkerchief. Jupiter sat down beside him. “Frankly, I like you better without the beard. Is Mr Beker responsible?”

He nodded. “You know Tom?”

“Knowing would be an exaggeration,” the First Investigator replied in an accommodating manner. “In the meantime, the special effects creator has tried to teach us the meaning of fear with a little scary gimmick. But we didn’t let ourselves be put off and we went ahead with your cyberspace adventure anyway. In the end, what he vehemently wanted to prevent with his grim actions has finally come true—we found out about you.”

The wind blew strongly, while the birds flew lower and chased each other. Jupiter put up the collar of his denim jacket and turned to Mr Dungeon.

“The answer to the puzzle we found for Oinki Hinki not only saves us from drowning miserably in the sewage, but it also opens the door to a treasure that you were about to withdraw from Eastwood Bank!” The First Investigator pointed to the briefcase that the programmer had placed at his feet. “We gave you the password that allowed you to gain access to an account whose owner has brought you to the point of collapse and of which you despise.”

“Timothy Bowfield!” Bob added. “You also called him a drunkard.”

Jupiter continued: “On receiving the password last Friday, you used online banking to access Timothy Bowfield’s account at Jefferson Bank and transferred a sum of money to Mitchel Cryder’s account here at Eastwood Bank. Two days over the weekend was sufficient for the funds transfer, and now that the funds have arrived, you are here to withdraw it in cash.”

The programmer pressed his lips together and clenched his fists.

“The plan was brilliant, but the execution had flaws,” Jupiter continued with his explanation. “You created the identity of the square and respectable businessman known as Mitchel Cryder. With the help of a fake ID, you opened an account under this name in Eastwood Bank, and gave as registration address, the apartment at 18 Southfire Street, Unit 9, which you had rented specifically for this purpose.”

Mr Dungeon slowly turned his head. “How did you figure all this out?”

"It was already clear to us on our second visit that you were in dire financial straits," said Jupiter calmly.

"What do you mean?" Mr Dungeon asked.

"We happened to overhear your conversation with Mrs Bushford and Mr Beker and we thought about it," Pete joined in the conversation.

"Your secretary, who is otherwise very efficient, has been acting rather strangely on several occasions. When she supposedly went to get sandwiches, she was away for a much longer time." Jupiter remembered his observations precisely. "And later, when she casually threw you the three letters, she unthinkingly missed the fact that mail is not delivered on a Sunday. That's when I began to wonder."

"Could you elaborate on that?" Mr Dungeon flinched.

"As chance would have it, you, Mr Dungeon, left the said letter lying open, with which according to the date, was sent four days earlier. When I then read the address of a Mr Mitchel Cryder, marked 'Personal/Confidential', I could deduce that Mrs Bushford had, apart from just getting sandwiches, went to clear the mailbox at 18 Southfire Street."

"Later that day, we went there to look around," Bob explained to the slumped programmer, "We made the charming acquaintance of your neighbour. She was able to give us a detailed description of the tenant. It was only because of our keen observation that we were able to expose you, Mr Dungeon, as Mitchel Cryder."

Nervously, Doe Dungeon tugged at his beard. Bob watched with fascination as some black hair came off the skin of his face.

"Pete also found the cut up photo of you and your childhood friend Timothy Bowfield in the wastepaper basket," Jupiter continued his explanations. "You've already told us about your relationship. At first his bank had granted you the loan for the computer game, but when the development time extended, he gave you a four-week respite, after which he withdrew from the loan agreement."

With a jerk, Mr Dungeon tore the artificial full beard off his face. "I'm on the edge of an abyss and Timothy Bowfield was about to deal me the death blow with his little finger! He thought he had the upper hand and would prove to me that not art but money rules the world. He is only interested in profits, and doesn't care about the game as such."

He clenched his fist again. "Now go to the police, boys, and tell them all you've uncovered. You're clever, I'll give you that, leaving the password on my answering machine only on Friday evening. You knew the earliest I could pick up the money from the bank was Monday." He took a deep breath. "I would never have thought that I would go to jail because of Timothy Bowfield. Life is strange."

The wind gradually subsided, and all was quiet.

"Still, it's a mystery to me why we had to find out a password for you to access Mr Bowfield's account," Bob broke the brief silence. "I mean, why did you need our help for this anyway?"

Mr Dungeon closed his eyes and sat back. "After I signed the loan agreement with Bowfield at that time, we both went out to celebrate our reunion and to toast our future. That night, I realized pretty quickly that he had not only managed to become a successful bank director, but that he had also taken a cup too much. In a short while, he was hopelessly drunk. He flaunted his fortune and gave me a lecture on the tight security systems he had at his bank. He continued babbling and somehow revealed to me his account details except for the password which, he said, was only 'stored' in his head. In writing, it would only be in the form of a puzzle."

“And then he told you the puzzle,” Pete threw in. “Six bananas and eight apples shared equally between four adults and three children.”

Mr Dungeon nodded. “That’s how it was. The next day, the drunkard could not remember anything of course. But this puzzle was burned into my head, and when Timothy dropped me, I saw the time had come to give him a juicy lesson. I was in serious financial trouble, but my first priority was to get revenge on that greedy guy!”

“This was probably the time when you decided to rename the title of your game *Vampire Castle* to *Sweet Revenge*...” Jupiter suspected, “for sweet revenge.”

“You got it. There was only one problem—until I knew the password, I couldn’t access Bowfield’s account.”

“The three of you attempted to solve the puzzle but was unsuccessful,” Bob added. “That’s when you contacted us and presented us with your computer game, hoping that we would solve Oinki Hinki’s puzzle, which you had built into the game especially for us, in the third level.”

Again the programmer nodded. “To be honest with you, we did want you to test the game in the first place. But for the purpose of the puzzle, Tom was against bringing detectives into the house from the beginning. But for the life of us, we couldn’t figure out what Timothy had with the apples and bananas. How many wrong passwords do you think we’ve already tried?

“We had another puzzle for that stage of the game, but I changed it to Timothy’s puzzle just for you to solve. But I did not program the answer for it because I didn’t know what it was. That means that you could never have passed through the third level.”

“Getting the password of a bank account with the help of your computer game, that’s quite something,” Jupiter had to admit. “Would anyone be harmed if Timothy Bowfield’s money, which is currently in Mitchel Cryder’s account, were to be transferred back for some inexplicable reason and Mr Cryder, along with his forged papers, were to vanish into thin air for equally inexplicable reasons?”

Mr Dungeon flinched. “What are you trying to say?”

“That you have no need to trespass on someone else’s property. Timothy Bowfield is not worth going to jail for, even if you are financially up to your neck,” Jupiter said. “You’re a genius, Mr Dungeon. *Sweet Revenge* is awesome! It would be a shame if a highly talented programmer like you had to glue bags instead of developing fascinating games!”

“I can only agree with that,” Pete added. “I’m sure that *Sweet Revenge* will sell like hot cakes. Then you are out of your misery and can confidently venture on a sequel with no financial pressure.”

“And... And you’re really not going to the police?” asked Mr Dungeon, stunned.

“If you return the money to Mr Bowfield and Mr Cryder cease to exist, I see no reason to do so,” replied Jupiter. “However, I will send an anonymous notice to the bank director that he has to change his supposedly secured password. After all, we don’t want to tempt you.”

There was relief on the face of the programmer. He reached for his briefcase and pointed to the taxi stand. “Come with me back to my office, boys. You can convince yourselves personally that I will seize the chance to iron everything out. I will transfer the funds back to Bowfield and Mr Mitchel Cryder will crumble to dust like a vampire and disappear from the face of the earth!”

Bob now also rose and looked at Mr Dungeon’s briefcase. “Say, is this by any chance the case you hid in the office for Mr Beker?”

“You don’t miss a detail, do you?” The programmer shook his head. “Tom’s case is still in a safe place. The bailiffs searched his apartment for valuable items. There was a seizure

order from his health insurance company. Well, they must have missed the case with the bassoon.”

“Bassoon?” Pete frowned.

“Yes. Tom is a bassoonist,” Mr Dungeon said. “Anyway, he came into my office, all upset, to secure the precious instrument, worth around \$20,000, from the bailiffs.

“Tom is a brilliant computer technician, but his greatest hobby is music. He composed and played the ‘Melodies of the Four Directions’ in the vampire epic himself. I won’t let anything come over him, even if his macabre humour sometimes goes beyond the bounds of good taste.” Mr Dungeon pressed his artificial beard back against his cheek.

“And where did you hide the bassoon case now?” Jupiter asked interested. “We searched the entire office and found nothing.”

Mr Dungeon could not wipe that grin off his face. “Well, you clever detectives! When the bailiffs arrive, you have to think of something! The case is safely stored in the broom closet next to the kitchen.”

“In the broom closet?” Bob frowned. “I looked in there. No sign of a case!”

“The case was hidden inside an old computer chassis,” Mr Dungeon said.

“Excellent, Mr Dungeon.” Jupiter urged him to proceed. “Let’s put the unpleasantness behind us and then turn to pleasure.” Mr Dungeon looked at them confused.

“Our mission is not yet complete,” Pete reminded him. “Oinki Hinki still owes us something! This infatuated dwarf has to lead us to Queen Trulie! And who knows, maybe The Three Investigators will be knighted in honour!”

18. Level 4

J-U-I-C-E. After Jupiter had entered the password into the grid, Oinki Hinki snapped his fingers, whereupon the enormous masses of sewage were sucked down through a drain pipe. Mr Dungeon had earlier entered the solution to the fruit puzzle into the game program to enable The Three Investigators to proceed with Level 4.

The overjoyed dwarf urged them to hurry, as the sun was about to rise and his deadline was only about an hour away. Pete lifted the sleeping prince from the pillow and climbed up a long ladder in the fireplace behind Oinki Hinki, Jupiter and Bob.

They entered the upper world through a manhole cover. Huge skyscrapers loomed before them in the dark. The streets were deserted. Nothing could be heard except the soft rustling of the wind.

Oinki Hinki put his finger to his lips in warning and hurried towards a glazed building, on the front of which a luminous advertising sign flashed. It showed a golden cross surrounded by sparkling stars.

The dwarf opened the door. "The church is the only safe place in this town. In it is the teleporter that will take you back to Marlon. Please, for goodness' sake, don't make any noise."

At that moment, Vinton opened his eyes and started screaming loudly!

"Hurry up, friends!" the dwarf cheered them on. He pointed to the dark sky, where a huge bat was inexorably approaching the church.

"That is Hehmator! He tracked us down! Get in there!" Oinki Hinki pushed them into the church and closed the door behind them and locked it. "Find the teleporter!" He urged The Three Investigators.

"Beware!" cried Jupiter shrilly.

The vampire lord raced in blind rage towards a glass window and rammed loudly into it with full force! Blood-curdling squeals were heard. The rams were repeated as the cracks on the window grew wider and wider! Jupiter, Pete and Bob felt shivers down their spines. This could be the end unless they escape in time.

"What should we do?" cried Pete desperately. "Bombs? Daggers? Or use the laser gun?"

"This is probably exactly what the demon wants!" Jupiter kept a cool head. "If our weapons destroy the glass window from inside, Hehmator will come in here and grab the baby! He won't be too impressed by our crucifix."

Again and again the vampire lord rammed against the glass window. The cracks grew as the baby kept crying incessantly. From all directions hordes of bats were coming towards the church! Hehmator and his loyalists continuously attacked the outside walls and windows of the church to reach the knights of Queen Trulie. Only a few seconds more and the glass would shatter!

"The teleporter! I found it!" Oinki Hinki waved to the three of them. "Here it is! Get into it quick!" The teleporter was placed next to the confessional. This time, it was not a casket, but looked more like a phone booth.

At that moment, several of the church windows collapsed! Hehmator was about to attack when the illuminated sign with the flashing crucifix fell on him and buried the vampire

lord under a shower of sparks. The realm of darkness had lost its master. Silently, thousands upon thousands of bats burned up in the dark sky.

“Make it snappy,” cried Oinki Hinki.

Jupiter entered the teleporter followed by Pete and Bob. Oinki Hinki closed the teleporter door and beamed it back to Marlon in no time at all.

Queen Trulie lay on her bed, close to death. Weakened by the insidious illness, she was hardly able to hold her rescued baby in her arms.

The Three Investigators stood before her and could not imagine that Mr Dungeon and his staff had programmed such a sad ending.

“Is there anything we can do to save the Queen?” Bob asked.

“Have you brought me another present besides my son?” Queen Trulie asked in a weak voice.

“She’s pretty greedy,” Bob noted with a wink. “What could we present the Queen with?”

Only now did Jupiter discover carved onto the wall above Trulie’s bed were four sets of horizontal parallel lines, with each set having five lines. These looked like staves for musical notes!

“I think I have an idea!” He clicked on the item menu and selected the music book from it.

Fascinated, they observed how the melodies of the East, West and North flew away from the music book and fitted into the top three staves on the wall. Then the tones of the bassoon sounded. The three melodies played at the same time. Another row of notes flew gently through the window, swept over Queen Trulie’s body and lined up in the fourth stave.

“Madness!” Jupiter exclaimed enthusiastically. “The missing ‘Melody of the South’ emerges when the other three melodies are played at the same time!”

While they listened to the fourth melody, Queen Trulie’s cheeks began to glow. The illness had disappeared from Marlon through the magic of music and peace returned to the country...

“A bit cheesy at the end, don’t you think?” Bob lifted the gaming helmet.

Pete took off his glove. “Well, I liked it. Only the end is rather abrupt!”

Jupiter waved away laughing. “Didn’t bother me, fellas. After all, it’s only a computer game!”